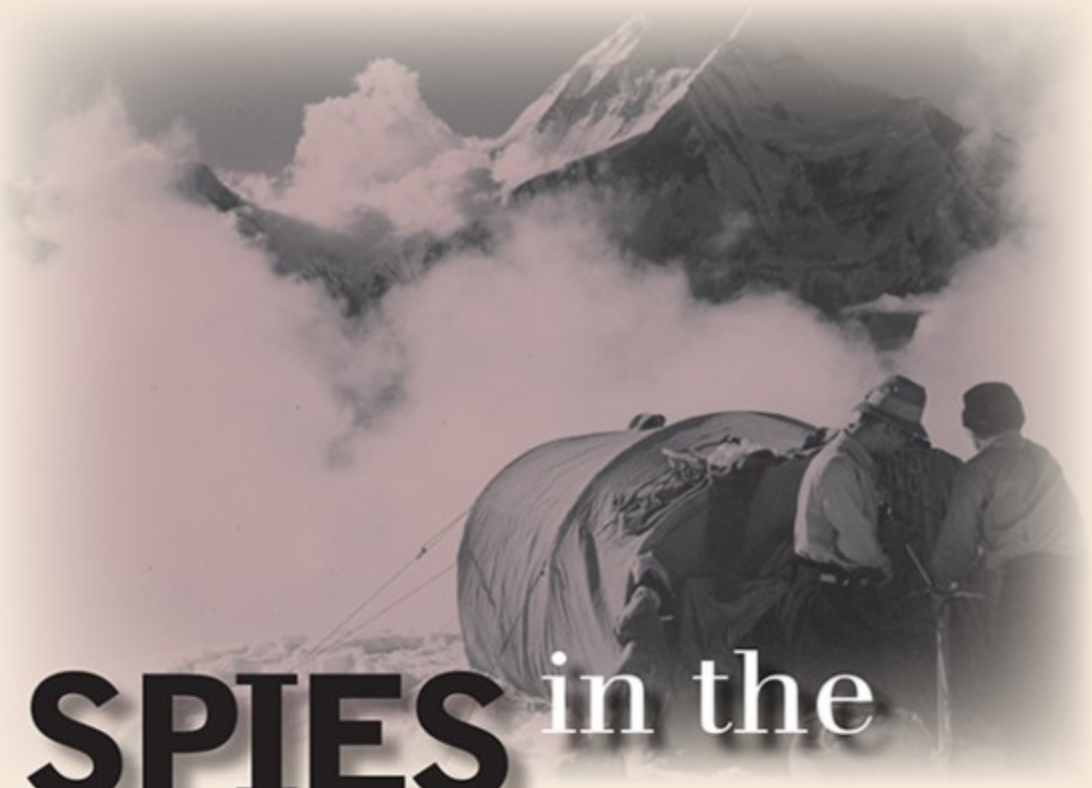
SPIES in the HIMALAYAS

A Secret Mission to Tibet and Beyond

M. S. KOHLI & KENNETH CONBOY



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SECRET MISSIONS & PERILOUS CLIMBS

M. S. KOHLI & KENNETH CONBOY

Spies in the Himalayas

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Spies in the Himalayas

Secret Missions and Perilous Climbs

M. S. Kohli
Kenneth Conboy

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PROLOGUE

In modern times, intelligence officers often fall into one of two categories. There are those on classic espionage assignments—the clichéd, tedious, and often frustrating attempts by case officers to extract kernels of information from foreign nationals in the back alleys of places like Moscow and Geneva. Then there are those on paramilitary operations—brushfire wars fought by covert warriors who train, direct, and often lead guerrillas in obscure corners of the globe like Afghanistan, Laos, and Nicaragua.

This story is neither. Due to a pressing requirement for unique skills, the intelligence agencies of the United States and India could not turn to their normal roster of spies or paramilitary operatives. Instead, they had to draw on a small fraternity of elite mountaineers to place a delicate monitoring device at the "roof of the world." Gone were cloaks and daggers; in their place were crampons and ice axes.

To the credit of those involved, the story stayed a secret for over a decade. Not until 1978 did details begin to emerge in the press. Many of those details, however, were based on hearsay and supposition; many, not surprisingly, were inaccurate. The more inflammatory charges—such as the holy Ganges being poisoned by radioactivity—had an incendiary effect in India. This effect was even more pronounced because of the political situation at the time. A fragile opposition alliance had recently come to power, and the former ruling party, now the outspoken opposition, was seeking a comeback.

Over the ensuing decades, oblique mention of the covert climbs occasionally cropped up in mountaineering journals, but the full story has never been told. Not a single member of these expeditions ever went public with an authoritative account. One of the authors, M. S. Kohli, was a joint leader of the mission. He kept his participation veiled—until now.

Here for the first time, all the Himalayan mountaineering expeditions sanctioned by the U.S. and Indian intelligence agencies are chronicled in detail. It is important that this story be told for several reasons. First, it puts Indo-U.S. relations in a more nuanced and pragmatic light. On the surface, bilateral relations often seemed strained at the highest levels. The relationship between President Lyndon Johnson and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, which was initially warm, developed a noticeable frost. Between intelligence agencies, however, cooperation in areas of bilateral interest, including the Himalayan project, was uninterrupted. And among the expedition members, rapport was outstanding.

Second, it is not often that the story of an intelligence operation can be told in such rich operational detail. This is possible in large part because mountaineers have a penchant for notations; their climbing diaries are often the only records they have of defining moments in their lives. This books draws on the notebook entries of several of the participants, offering insights and even sensations that are usually lost in accounts of other covert operations. Having such an authentic account sheds proper light on these controversial events and goes far in dispelling long-standing rumors that once caused such diplomatic and political angst.

Last, it is a good yarn. Rarely can one appreciate the excitement of a major Himalayan expedition mixed with clandestine overtones. And from a wholly mountaineering perspective, it fills in gaps in the history of ascents around the Nanda Devi Sanctuary during the mid-1960s. Until now, this period has been a black hole in climbing references.

This book is based on both written sources and extensive oral interviews. In the United States, the written sources were gathered from the Foreign Relations of the United States series, as well as releases in the Declassified Documents Reference System and relevant media transcripts recorded by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. Particularly helpful

were the electronic briefing books on China's nuclear weapons program compiled by the National Security Archives.

For oral sources, Gurcharan Bhangu was especially helpful in filling in gaps from his diary notations and sharp memory. A. K. Dave, H. A. Barari, Air Marshal (retired) M. K. Anand, R. S. Swaminathan, and Davinder Suri were all patient and generous with their assistance. R. N. Kao and Major General (retired) S. S. Uban also went out of their way to offer their insights and commentary; sadly, both passed away before the publication of this book. From the United States, the late James Morrison, a dear friend and gifted researcher, lent critical assistance with some of the early interviews. Given the wide range of sources, and the perspectives they bring, this work has been written in the third person.

Although all books are a collaborative effort, we take responsibility for everything in these pages. Any errors in fact or interpretation are our own.

Spies in the Himalayas

The twin peaks of Nanda Devi

CHAPTER ONE

Almost Heaven

The idea to plant a nuclear-powered sensor in the Himalayas was hatched at a Washington cocktail party, or so the story goes. National Geographic Society staff photographer Barry Bishop was a regular on the circuit, where his impressive résumé had made him a celebrity of sorts. From helping to map Mount McKinley to conducting research on the Greenland icecap to serving as scientific adviser on the staff of Rear Admiral Richard Byrd, Bishop's experiences were as diverse as they were challenging. His defining moment had been atop Mount Everest during the first U.S. expedition to the summit in the spring of 1963. Selected as National Geographic's official photographer for the climb, he had succeeded almost at the cost of his life. Blasted by the cold and delirious from lack of oxygen, he left its slope with his feet frozen a sickly black and eventually lost his toes.[1]

After that ordeal, the thirty-two-year-old Bishop was spending much of his time behind a desk in Washington when he shared a fateful cocktail with U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis LeMay in the summer of 1964. General LeMay, the first head of the Strategic Air Command (a post he held for nearly a decade) and the primary architect of America's nuclear missile program, was the archetype of hawkish Pentagon brass. He was also a National Geographic Society trustee and had extended U.S. Air Force sponsorship, along with the magazine, for the 1963 Everest expedition.

On the surface, the photographer-cum-mountaineer and crusty cold warrior seemed to have little in common. But when Bishop spoke of the unique vantage point from atop the Himalayas—with an unfettered view across Chinese-occupied Tibet—LeMay was all ears. North of the Tibetan plateau was the expansive and arid salt deserts of China's Xinjiang province, where the Beijing government had sited testing ranges for its fledgling nuclear weapons and missile programs.

Synergy between the two men suddenly became obvious. Bishop knew the Himalayas and appreciated the scientific and photographic aspects of high-altitude climbing. LeMay, whose air force was responsible for tracking tests by nuclear states and threshold nations, felt a pressing concern about China's nuclear program. For him, the ability to peer into Xinjiang and glean information about Beijing's atomic tests held merit. An era of covert mountaineering was about to begin.[2]

Human beings and extreme altitudes are not made for each other. By the time a person reaches a height equivalent to the Mount Everest base camp—17,800 feet—there is about half the amount of oxygen found at sea level; by the time a climber reaches the Everest summit—29,028 feet—there is only a third. Atop such superpeaks, the human body starts to decay rapidly. Lethargy increases, and taking even a single step becomes a major undertaking. Appetite falls off, and the body cannot stay hydrated due to heavy breathing in the thin air; profound weight loss results. Scrapes refuse to heal, and illnesses get more serious. Blood becomes more viscous due to the lack of oxygen, making clotting a problem. Because the brain is not getting enough oxygen either, thinking is adversely affected. A person with an even temper and good sense can suddenly become argumentative or make amateurish mistakes, but he does not recognize the mistakes for what they are, and because apathy rises sharply in this hypoxic state, he is simply indifferent.

But despite facing such certain hardships, the international subculture of top mountaineers shares a willingness to perform the irrational in order to come as close as possible to touching the heavens. In the United States, Barry Bishop belonged to that club. Half a world away in India, the spotlight belonged to Manmohan "Mohan" Singh Kohli, his country's most eminent climber. Few would have guessed that mountaineering would become his life's passion. Kohli was born in Haripur, a small town about 60 miles northeast of Peshawar in the hilly Hazara district of the North West Frontier Province. Situated on the bank of the Indus River and centered in an area traditionally ruled by feudal chieftains, Haripur gained some sense of law and order during Sikh rule in the nineteenth century. This came at a cost: while Sikh warriors were asserting their

control, one group of soldiers fought to the death on a steep precipice overlooking Haripur. This vantage point—Martyr's Hill—became a pilgrimage site to commemorate their sacrifice.

As a child, Kohli ascended Martyr's Hill with his family as an annual ritual. Also exposing him to the rugged outdoors were the long daily treks to school and baths in the closest river. Visits to relatives were even more arduous, almost always entailing more than a day of walking over ranges frequented by lawless tribal elements.

Such hardships aside, Kohli's family was relatively well off. Theirs was a proud martial lineage that had been successful in business. His ancestors had been particularly prominent in the community, including one of the few Sikhs to be personally baptized by Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and most illustrious Sikh leader who had codified the Sikh's separate identity, including the turban, and militant image.

All this history counted for little in early 1947. With India's freedom from colonial rule nearly a reality, sectarian violence exploded across the subcontinent. Among the first areas affected was Hazara district. With daily murders taking place in his hometown, Kohli was hard-pressed to finish his high school exams. The daily walk to school, eventful in even the best of times, took on a deadly edge when several of his friends were stabbed en route. Despite such distractions, he finished his last exam in March and got his diploma. Later that month, Kohli's father gathered his two sons and made a fateful decision. The situation around Haripur was growing too dangerous, so they would migrate west to a more peaceful area within the subcontinent. This meant abandoning their belongings and property. Worse, finding meaningful employment promised to be almost impossible.

Kohli's family was hardly alone. As internal migration snowballed, three top Indian leaders took to the airwaves on 2 June to give details about the country's impending division into India and the bifurcated Muslim nation of Pakistan to the east and west. They implored their countrymen to remain in their hometowns, and those who had migrated were asked to return. Heeding that request, Kohli and his father went back to Haripur, now part of Pakistan as of

14 August. But on 15 August, when India became independent and most South Asians were celebrating their official independence from England, the mood turned ugly in Hazara district. Haripur was burned to the ground, and nearly all resident Hindus and Sikhs were butchered. Among the few to escape were Kohli and his father, who sought refuge in a nearby fort. A week later, Pakistani troops shifted the refugees to a larger military camp, and a month after that, they got word that they were being loaded on open train cars and shipped to India.

That ride was nearly Kohli's last. Before crossing the Indian frontier, emotional Muslim militants, emerging after Friday prayers, fired on the train with rifles. With no shelter on the open cars, nearly half the refugees were killed. Kohli later found a bullet hole in his shirt-sleeve, but fortunately he ended up with only a bruise. At that point, a miracle took place. On the opposite track, a Pakistani train arrived with an infantry battalion from the Baluch Regiment. The senior officer on that train was Brigadier Ayub Khan, later field marshal and president of Pakistan. Kohli's father, who knew the brigadier, jumped off the train and apprised him of the situation. The Baluch troops reacted quickly, forming a cordon around the open cars and escorting them to the border.

Sixty days after leaving the ruins of Haripur, Kohli arrived safely at the town of Amritsar. He later moved to Delhi, where he lived for the next seven years, and took a battery of civil service exams to try to get a job in the government. He passed them all but was drawn to a career in the navy because of its reputation for travel opportunities and good pay. Though the navy was not exactly a breeding ground for climbers, Kohli heard the mountains calling. After initial officer training in southern India, he was posted to a naval engineering base at the hill station of Lonavla, near Mumbai. By coincidence, the British naval officer who had earlier commanded Lonavla had founded a Deep Sea Scout Troop, a maritime version of the Boy Scouts. Kohli was given command of this troop, which entailed leading teens on weekend treks across the surrounding hills.

Kohli would soon see even taller terrain. In 1955, he became eligible for home leave. All officers had to declare their hometowns, but displaced persons from Pakistan were allowed to select any locale. Eager to see snow for the first time, Kohli chose Pahalgam in the mountainous Kashmir. Once there, he found snow in abundance. He also chanced upon a Hindu stranger who was planning to take a three-day pilgrimage to a holy shrine nearby. Though wearing only thin cotton clothes and casual shoes, Kohli decided to accompany him. Halfway there, the stranger—who was insulated with a woolen sweater—was turned back by deep snow. Fortified by a small bottle of brandy and a jar of honey, Kohli continued to the shrine, met with a resident hermit, and was guided back safely.

The thrill of that climb proved infectious. In 1956, the twenty-five-year-old naval officer managed to land a slot at the basic course offered by the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (HMI), the brainchild of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who harbored a passion for mountain vistas after honeymooning in the Kashmir glaciers. HMI had opened its doors in Darjeeling only the previous year. A six-week basic course was offered by its cast of distinguished instructors, including Tenzing Norgay, who made the maiden ascent of Mount Everest. Kohli did well in the basic course and was immediately included in the advanced course, the members of which were targeted against a virgin mountain in Ladakh, situated in the Karakoram Range and buttressing a traditional Central Asian trade route to China and Russia. Though this proved to be an uncompromising baptism by fire—their expedition was plagued by avalanches and horrid weather—Kohli returned to the fleet feeling pretty good, having completed both courses in a single year.

It would be another three years before Kohli was back among the high peaks. He was posted to a frigate at Mumbai, and his captain was a climbing buff with an eye on Nanda Kot. One of the better-known mountains in the Kumoan Himalayas, it had been attempted by four previous expeditions, but only one, a 1936 Japanese team, had succeeded in reaching the top. It was the captain’s dream to scale Nanda Kot with an all-navy team. When he put out a call for volunteers, he did not have to ask Kohli twice. But as luck would have

it, the captain was forced to bow out at the eleventh hour due to ill health, and suddenly, with just a single expedition under his belt, Kohli was team leader. The rest of the team consisted of two other naval officers, a pair of sailors, and some Sherpas, residents of northeastern Nepal who excel as high-altitude porters.

On 7 May, Kohli's team managed to set up base camp on the side of Nanda Kot. A bit less than three weeks later, they had struggled up its slope and were poised within reach of the summit. The party that would make the end run consisted of Kohli, a sailor, and a single Sherpa. When they left their tents for the final leg, however, the peak still seemed a long way off. Half an hour later, they found out why. An enormous bulging dome of hard ice ran in a gentle ellipse toward the top. Using the crampons—grids of steel spikes—on their boots to grip the glassy surface, they started over the dome in a light breeze. After traversing numerous crevasses, the curved ice field was below them by 1030 hours. Another 787 feet away was the summit. In between there remained one last obstacle: a knife-edge ridge that fell away in a near-vertical drop to the Nanda Kot glacier. This meant an exhausting traverse across a harrowing path —a sight that made their Sherpa sit back in defeat, drained and unable to proceed. Roped together for safety, Kohli and the sailor carefully belayed each other upward. At 1420 hours, Kohli was touching the summit cornice. He broke a hole through it, lifted himself up on his elbows, and crawled the last few feet. When he was joined on top by the sailor, they unfurled a navy pendant before beginning the laborious descent.

By the time Kohli returned to his post at Mumbai, there was talk of an Indian expedition to Mount Everest the next summer. Coming off the Nanda Kot success, he was fortunate to land a spot on the team. After a practice run on an icefall in the princely fiefdom of Sikkim, they departed for Nepal in the spring. But the gods, it seemed, were not on their side. On the first summit attempt, the weather turned malicious, and the climbing party was forced to scurry for lower altitudes. Two more assaults were attempted—Kohli in one of them—but blizzards forced them back just 700 feet short of their goal. Though

they had been proficient in overcoming physical obstacles, they had been thoroughly humbled by nature.

Exhausted by the Everest attempt, it was not until the following year, 1961, that Kohli tried his hand at another major peak. Annapurna III, a 24,858-foot mountain in Nepal's towering Annapurna Range, was both unclimbed and unexplored. Though this should have been challenge enough, some of the greatest danger came from villagers near its base. Soon after departing up the side, Kohli received a frantic call over the walkie-talkie that locals had turned up at the base camp and were demanding an enormous ransom for the traversal of their territory. Haggling ensued, and a reduced sum of money and cigarettes was eventually agreed on.

On the slope, however, their troubles had just started. Ahead was a huge glacial trough nearly half a mile wide, and the only access was a two-mile diversion to the east. This added walk, made worse by high altitude and subzero temperatures, seemed endless. Then, when they were finally in position for a dash to the summit, the wind and snow turned up several notches. Their only option was to set up tents and wait for clear skies. Kohli woke early the next morning and found that the snow had subsided. Taking advantage of the lull, they dragged themselves toward the top, only to find a false summit. The actual peak was a small hump less than 300 feet away at the end of a mild, sloping ridge. Struggling onward, they finally got there, hoisted pendants, and snapped pictures.

As they scrambled off Annapurna III, the weather again began to conspire against them. Their earlier tracks had been obliterated by wind and snow, forcing the climbers to feel their way down as if blind. Lightning would occasionally bathe them in shades of blue, and the thunder that followed started to precipitate avalanching. All the while they were dogged by an annoying hum emanating from their goggles—apparently an effect of nearby lightning on the metal frames of the glasses.

One year after the success at Annapurna III, Kohli found himself back on Mount Everest for India's second attempt to reach the summit. Now holding the rank of lieutenant commander, he was named deputy leader of the expedition. In many ways, this encore proved more frustrating than the initial outing. On the way up, one of the Sherpas got hit in the abdomen by a pineapple-sized rock, inflicting lethal damage. Pressing onward despite the loss, they divided into three summit parties. Kohli and his two colleagues, after spending two nights at the inhospitable South Col due to bad weather, got as far as 27,650 feet before pausing to establish the highest summit camp up to that time. This was within

the so-called death zone, where the human body slowly but steadily begins to die. Waiting for good weather, they huddled in a tent with sufficient oxygen for a single night; by rationing their air, they managed to stay for two. Each time they put an oxygen bottle to their faces, they would instantly fall asleep as if mesmerized.

Finally, on the morning of the third day it dawned clear. The mountaineers started out well enough, but 330 feet short of the top the weather turned ugly. Their climb had stretched through the late afternoon, leaving them with a nightmarish choice: They could reach the summit, but because there was insufficient daylight left to return to their tent, it would be a one-way trip. If they turned around, they disappointed the nation but had a chance of surviving. Even with their senses deadened from hypoxia, the climbers showed some prudence and chose the latter option. Thunder and lightning echoed and glinted all around, and the wind churned the slopes, erasing their earlier steps and causing them to lose their way. With the sun falling below the horizon, they stumbled for an hour in darkness in a vain attempt to locate their tent. On two occasions, they paused to say last prayers.

At one point, the two climbers roped together with Kohli lost their footing and began to tumble downward. Reflexively, Kohli drove his ice ax into the snow like a bullet. He held his ground, and the other two took half an hour to move back to their earlier position. Now reduced to a crawl, all three continued on their hands and knees. Finally, at nearly 2200 hours, a black shape rose before them. It was the tent, or rather the top half of it peeking through a snowdrift. Entering with their boots on, they slid into their sleeping bags. It was their third night at that extreme height, and this time without food or bottled oxygen. Despite pain and discomfort, they drifted off into a surprisingly sound sleep. By the time they reached the base camp the next day, they discovered that the rest of their party had given them up for dead. Down but not out, they immediately reserved the next available time slot—not until the spring of 1965—for another shot at Everest.

In the interim, India fought a brief but bloody border conflict with China. India's military and paramilitary forces were fully absorbed with this episode,

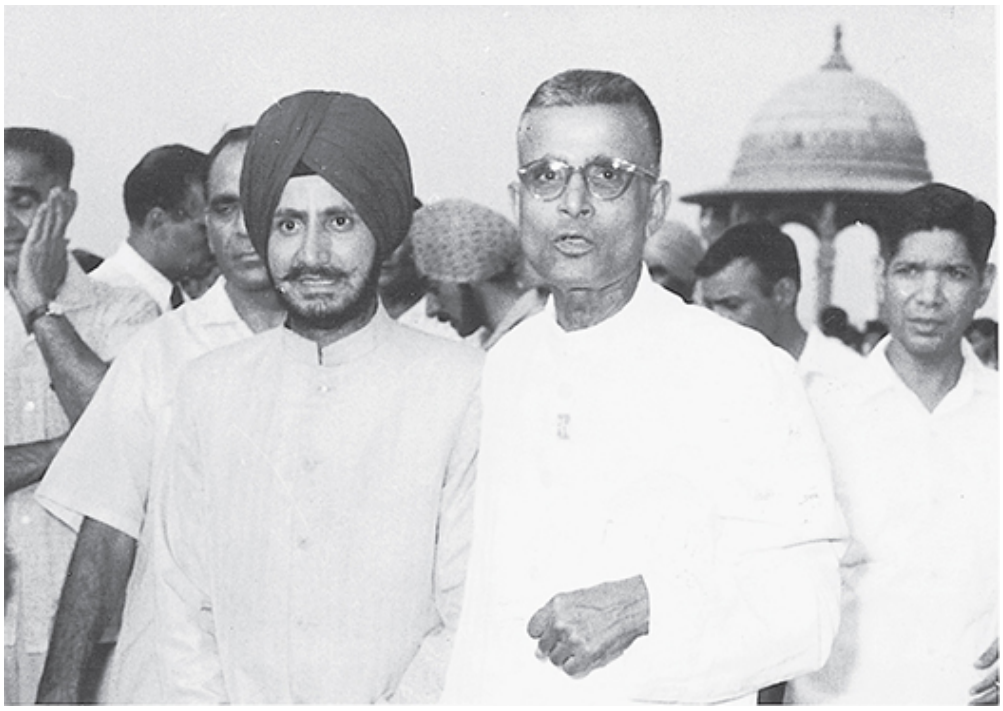
and Kohli was deputized to lend advisory support for high-altitude warfare. But by the opening of 1965, he was back on track for a third attempt on Everest. This time around, he was to be expedition leader. With the hopes of the nation on the team's shoulders—and especially on Kohli's—he was determined not to take any detail for granted. The amount of preparation that went into such a major climb was nothing short of mind-boggling. Because the climbers were ordered to domestically manufacture as much of their equipment as possible, this entailed frequent trips to various textile mills to order the correct fabric for their sleeping bags, windproof suits, and tents. For woolen items, such as pullovers and socks, they meticulously compared machine-made and hand-knitted alternatives. One Mumbai firm made their ladders; another did their rope. A Calcutta company turned out a good clone of an American rucksack. India's Defense Ministry, which was just beginning to experiment with freeze-dried foods, reserved its entire six-month stockpile for them. For items that could not be made domestically, the mountaineers looked overseas. Quality boots came from Italy, oxygen bottles from France, cameras from Japan, high-altitude tents and battery-heated socks from the United States. Apart from a few minor delivery glitches, they received everything they needed on schedule.

On 20 February, all the required equipment—twenty-five tons of it—was packed in railroad cars at New Delhi for the shuttle to the Nepalese border. It was at that point that Kohli received an unexpected visitor. Barry Bishop, the photographer from the 1963 U.S. expedition to Everest, made an unannounced appearance in the Indian capital. Kohli had briefly met Bishop once before at a reception for the American team after its Everest success. Kohli found Bishop's sudden return to New Delhi a bit odd. Out of courtesy and protocol, it was customary for foreign mountaineers to notify the Indian climbing authorities prior to their arrival. "Bishop," he recalled, "had broken this tradition and showed up with no forewarning."

Even more bizarre was Bishop's preoccupation with Kanchenjunga, the world's third tallest mountain located on the border of Nepal and Sikkim. With almost no attempt at small talk, Bishop took Kohli aside and asked if he would immediately accompany him on a scouting trip to the Zemu Glacier at the base

of that peak. Having participated in an Everest mission, Bishop must have known that Kohli could not be distracted on virtually the eve of his departure. “I told him I would not be able to spare him five more minutes, much less take time to go to the Zemu Glacier,” said the Indian team leader. “But this did not appear to dampen his sudden enthusiasm in Kanchenjunga.”

Though Kohli was scheduled to leave New Delhi within two days, he found Bishop’s conduct sufficiently strange to warrant comment. Over the past few years, he had come in contact with various senior members of India’s Intelligence Bureau, often during government receptions held after his various climbing expeditions. No intelligence officer held more clout than Bhola Nath Mullik. A member of the bureau since age thirty-three, he had become its director in 1950 and was one of Nehru’s closest confidants. Serious and aloof, he was a confirmed anticommunist (rare in India in those days), extremely austere (he drove himself to work in a vintage Austin A-40 sedan), and thoroughly devoted to his job (he had never taken a day’s leave since entering government service). Though forced to cede some of his considerable powers in October 1964, he remained a formidable personality and retained control over several covert paramilitary projects along the Tibetan border. In haste, Kohli penned a note to Mullik outlining his suspicions about Bishop’s unannounced visit and focus on Kanchenjunga. That done, he boarded a train and proceeded toward the waiting slopes of Everest.



M. S. Kohli (left) and Intelligence Bureau Director B. N. Mullik, 1965. Little did Kohli know, Mullik had been the one who sent Bishop.

1. National Geographic, vol. 119, no. 6 (June 1961).

2. Bishop related the cocktail party story to fellow climber Dan Wolfe. Interview with Dan Wolfe, 5 October 2000.

CHAPTER TWO

Convergent Minds

Though they were the world's two most populous democracies, which might have made them seem natural partners, relations between India and the United States during the formative years of the Cold War were anything but close. There were several reasons for this. India's long colonial experience left it with an undercurrent of suspicion toward the West. For some Indian leaders, tweaking the nose of the United States became a trendy and domestically popular pastime. There was also a general acceptance of Fabian socialism among India's upper echelons, which flew in the face of America's market capitalism.

Worst of all, from Washington's point of view, was New Delhi's commitment to diplomatic nonalignment. Especially during the first term of President Dwight Eisenhower, when foreign policy was heavily influenced by his puritan secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, nations were seen as either for the United States or against it. With no room for shades of gray, India's tightrope neutrality—and Nehru's self-declared role as a conduit of peace between East and West—was seen as morally suspect by Dulles.

There were other factors exacerbating the strains in Indo-U.S. relations. After an ugly separation of Pakistan from India in 1947, the two nations became bitter enemies. Pakistan, however, recognized that the best way to stock up on U.S. military equipment was to heartily play Washington's game of containment against the Soviet bloc. In short order, Karachi became America's "most allied ally in Asia," and the spigot of U.S. weapons started to flow. Naturally, this rubbed India raw.

There was also the role of the Soviet Union. With Washington irate at New Delhi over nonalignment, and New Delhi incensed over U.S. weapons deliveries to Pakistan, Moscow was quick to offer itself to New Delhi as a

concerned friend with no strings attached. Indo-Soviet ties, as a result, began to bloom.

Eventually, a new sense of pragmatism began to soften Eisenhower's uncompromising position on nonalignment. By the November 1960 presidential election, won by John Kennedy in a tight race, a full reappraisal of Indo-U.S. ties was in the works. The reason for this had much to do with the People's Republic of China, which Kennedy viewed as the most serious threat to Asian stability. A prosperous India, he felt, would be a fitting counterweight to the model offered by China. Matching his rhetoric with action, he filled several key foreign policy appointments with India experts.

Two years later, Indo-U.S. relations received an unexpected boost. Blitzing the Indian frontier from the higher altitudes of Tibet during the third quarter of 1962, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) sliced through a string of Indian outposts in the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA, now called Arunachal Pradesh) in the east and Ladakh (in Jammu and Kashmir state) in the west. Fighting became particularly intense in NEFA, where huge swaths of territory were captured by the better-equipped and better-acclimated Chinese troops.

The outbreak of border fighting was not completely unexpected. For centuries, successive Chinese empires had liberally interpreted their imperial reach. At various times, they laid claim to Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, and extensive parts of India's northeast. Most of these areas were included on maps published by China after the communist government took power in 1949. Although India resented this cartographic intrusion, Nehru was convinced that the world's two most populous nations could live in peace and had even made peaceful coexistence one of the cornerstones of India's foreign policy.

But despite Nehru's intent, Indo-Chinese relations worsened. A major cause of the friction was Tibet, a closeted mountain kingdom that for centuries had enjoyed de facto independence. In 1950, China had pushed its

way into Tibet, though it maintained the veneer of a quasi-autonomous Tibetan government. By the end of the decade, however, much of Tibet's nonsecular ruling elite—most notably the kingdom's premier spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama—had either fled or were imprisoned. The PLA, deployed up to India's border with Tibet, increasingly stepped over the line. Casualties mounted, especially among Indian border patrols, and diplomatic saber rattling increased in tempo and tone.

By mid-1962, many of India's top brass saw a conflict with China as inevitable. Nehru, however, was still clinging to the hope that Beijing

would desist from extreme provocations. He was being counseled along these lines by his influential defense minister, Krishna Menon, who had especially prickly relations with the United States.

Ultimately, China's leaders did not show the restraint that Nehru and Menon had anticipated. And when the Chinese finally blitzed the border, Nehru sought foreign help. Coincidentally, the two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—were engaged in a nuclear stare-down as the Kennedy administration ordered a naval blockade to prevent Soviet ships containing missiles from entering the island of Cuba. Because Moscow needed Beijing's support during this crisis, a quid pro quo called for its backing of China in the border fighting with India.

The United States, by contrast, was more than willing to aid India. During the third week of November 1962—by which time China had already declared a unilateral cease-fire along the Indian border—a high-ranking delegation led by senior statesman Averell Harriman arrived in New Delhi to discuss areas of support. With him were not only top Pentagon officials but also key personnel from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). While Harriman pledged assistance in the public spotlight, it was behind closed doors that the CIA contingent and their Indian counterparts from the Intelligence Bureau hashed out joint covert programs.

Most of their cooperation was targeted toward Tibet. Reacting strongly against Beijing's incremental subjugation, an indigenous armed resistance movement had been active in that kingdom since 1956. By the spring of 1959, rising tension between the Tibetans and the occupying PLA had reached a breaking point. Sensing that the end was near, Tibet's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, fled the capital of Lhasa immediately before a brutal Chinese crackdown killed thousands. Along with scores of his countrymen, he sought refuge on Indian soil.

In the run-up to the Dalai Lama's exile, the CIA had been air-dropping a limited amount of supplies to the Tibetan resistance. These flights—first

staged from East Pakistan (the eastern wing of the bifurcated Pakistani nation) and later from Thailand—briefly crossed Indian territory on their way to Tibet. Publicly, India feigned ignorance, but Intelligence Bureau Director B. N. Mullik had been unofficially briefed by the CIA on the flights. Mullik, who had long harbored concerns about a Chinese military threat, privately assured the CIA that he supported these efforts; he also claimed that Nehru, who sympathized with the Tibetans and had been soured by Beijing's heavy-handed tactics, did not oppose covert American aid. However, since Nehru was still committed to maintaining cordial ties with China, the best Mullik could offer at that time was a wink and a nod.

The CIA found a far more receptive Indian audience in November 1962. By the end of Harriman's visit, the agency and the bureau had agreed to cooperate on several secret paramilitary programs. The first of these projects was an envisioned 5,000-man commando force based in India and consisting entirely of Tibetan refugee recruits. The Indians had actually conjured this project on 14 October, predating the Harriman visit by a week. But now with the United States on board, the unit was to be an Indian-controlled formation with limited CIA material and advisory support. Its role was to act as a behind-the-lines commando unit that could strike deep inside Tibet in the event of renewed Chinese hostilities.

Command of this Tibetan force went to General Sujan Singh Uban. Fifty-one years old in 1962, Uban was an artillery officer with a reputation for unorthodox tactics. The army command was looking for an unconventional mind to harness the Tibetans, and Uban was willing and available. With the help of American financial aid and a CIA instructor team, he set up camp in the tranquil hill village of Chakrata and began the process of turning refugees into warriors.[1]

In the end, the Tibetan unit exceeded all expectations. The Tibetans particularly excelled as parachutists and had the distinction of conducting jumps at altitudes up to 15,400 feet using chutes specially procured by the

CIA. “There was even a pregnant lady, the wife of the Tibetan ranking member, serving as a rigger,” said M. K. Anand, an air force officer and parachute instructor involved in the Tibetan program, “who kept her pregnancy a secret to keep jumping.”[2]

A second joint CIA–Intelligence Bureau project involved raising a cadre of long-term Tibetan agents that could establish a resistance network inside their homeland. The agents would receive extensive tradecraft training at a CIA base in Colorado. As the project was originally conceived, India would provide limited assistance during their infiltration back into Tibet.

To lend air support to the Tibetan commandos and agents, a third joint program was envisioned. Known as the Aviation Research Centre (ARC), it was actually a subsection of the Intelligence Bureau and was staffed by bureau officers and aircrews seconded from the Indian Air Force. Its aircraft, a mix of transports and light planes, would come courtesy of the CIA. Instrumental in the establishment of ARC was Indian statesman Biju Patnaik, then the chief minister from the state of Orissa. Patnaik’s father, also a minister from Orissa, had spent ten years in prison in the fight for Indian independence, so perhaps it was only natural that such activism and adventurism rubbed off on the son. As a teen, Patnaik cycled across the subcontinent—no mean feat, given the poor state of the roads in those days.

By the time of World War II, Patnaik had joined the Royal Air Force and was trained as a pilot. For his part in evacuating several British families stranded in Burma, he received accolades from London. He also performed wartime flights to the Soviet Union and Iran. Despite such service, Patnaik never lost his sense of patriotism. Like his father, he served several years in prison in the years immediately before independence. After his release, Patnaik converted his passion for flying into a business by founding Kalinga Airways. One of his initial contracts was to drop food to isolated Indian outposts along the northeastern border. He was also involved in an

extremely dangerous flight to Indonesia—then in the final stages of Dutch colonial rule—to smuggle out nationalist leader Muhammad Hatta for an Asian tour to win diplomatic support. Hatta would later become the first vice president of the independent Republic of Indonesia.

At the time of the Chinese attack in November 1962, Patnaik swung into action with customary flair. Flying from Orissa to New Delhi, he met Nehru and offered his state's assistance in establishing a resistance movement behind Chinese lines. Nehru liked the idea and steered him to intelligence chief Mullik. Though the Chinese declared a cease-fire before the idea went far, Patnaik immediately began brainstorming the creation of a covert aviation outfit for use along the border. With Mullik's concurrence, it was Patnaik who ventured to Washington to flesh out the concept with the CIA. The Americans saw merit in the plan and dispatched two officers to India for an initial fact-finding tour. N. N. Vohra, who later served as defense secretary, home secretary, and president of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, escorted them across India's northern border as part of the assessment.

Selected as the first ARC director in the third quarter of 1963 was Rameshwar Nath Kao. Cool and methodical, Kao was a consummate spy in the traditional mold. He had joined the colonial police in 1940 and then transferred to the Intelligence Bureau seven years later, where he impressed his superiors with his keen intellect and calm demeanor under pressure. As the director of ARC, Kao not only oversaw covert air support but also served as senior liaison for most joint paramilitary programs with the CIA.

ARC Director R. N. Kao (third from left) and Cabinet Secretary S. S. Khera (second from left) meet members of the 1961 Annapurna III expedition. On the far right is Sonam Gyatso.

There were two other paramilitary units raised under the purview of the Intelligence Bureau during this period, though neither had major links to the CIA. The first, known as the Special Service Bureau (SSB), was born from the earlier musings of Mullik and Patnaik about harnessing tribal resistance along India's vast frontier. The SSB was officially created in March 1963, and the concept behind it was simple: India could not allow the hill tribes to remain passive, especially in the event of a repeat Chinese offensive. Rather, Mullik and Patnaik envisioned a motivated, empowered border populace that would offer stiff opposition in every village and on every hill. To develop such a nationalist spirit among the frontier populations (initially in NEFA), the SSB looked to employ locals in various civic action projects, such as building roads and schools. Overseeing this program was a divisional officer appointed at the provincial level; area organizers would serve under him.

Not all the SSB's activities were based on winning hearts and minds. Special battalions were placed at the disposal of area organizers to train the

local population in the use of rudimentary weapons and guerrilla warfare techniques. At the same time, an unconventional warfare training base (known as the Frontier Officers Administrative Training Center) was established in the forested hills near Mumbai to give senior SSB advisers a six-week primer in topics such as resistance operations, map reading, demolitions, airdrop techniques, and booby traps. Students were exposed to a variety of weapons, including those from U.S., Chinese, and Soviet arsenals. Field exercises—pitting the instructor candidates against an imaginary Chinese foe—were conducted in the forests around the center. These exercises, and the SSB program in general, received support from British military advisers for the first two years. One of the original senior instructors was former SAS officer Terrence Kitcat. Another, John Edwards, hailed from the Royal Marine Commandos; he kept nearly a hundred snakes in his bungalow, offering ample disincentive for burglars.

The second paramilitary unit was the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), designed to patrol the world's highest border. Originally formed on 24 October 1962 as the Frontier Rifles, it was later renamed the Indo-Tibetan Border Force before finally becoming the ITBP. These name changes were deemed necessary because of a prohibition against deploying military units close to the Tibetan frontier; as a police outfit, the ITBP was exempt from this restriction. Because the ITBP would be operating in some of the most rugged and inhospitable terrain on the planet, its members had to be coached in special skills such as skiing, cold-weather survival, and mountaineering.

One of the ITBP's prime architects was senior intelligence officer Balbir Singh. An outstanding field hockey player in his college years, Balbir later excelled as a police officer in the Punjab and caught the attention of Mullik, who brought him to New Delhi in 1955 to work for the Intelligence Bureau.[3] Kohli first met Balbir Singh back in 1961 when the Intelligence Bureau threw a reception in honor of the Annapurna III

expedition. On first impression, Balbir cut quite a figure. Tall, energetic, and a dapper dresser, he even managed to tie his turban with a distinctive flair. At the reception, Sonam Gyatso, one of Kohli's teammates on the Annapurna climb who also happened to work for the bureau, gave Kohli a nudge and pointed Balbir out, saying, "He's a big gun."

Kohli's next contact with Balbir came a year later. It was the end of 1962, barely a month after the Sino-Indian conflict, and he had accepted a position at the Defence Ministry as an adviser on snow clothing. The offer had seemed exciting in the beginning, but in reality, the post promised little more than visits to the textile mills around Mumbai. In addition, Kohli had just gotten married on 18 November, and the prospect of frequent and extended trips away from his bride, Pushpa, was not welcome. The job, moreover, afforded him little chance to pursue mountaineering.

Kohli (right) and Sonam Gyatso (second from right) listen as senior intelligence officer Balbir Singh addresses members of the Annapurna III expedition.

Having second and third thoughts, Kohli recalled his fleeting exposure to the Intelligence Bureau. Sonam Gyatso had never offered details of his bureau work, but Kohli let his imagination fill in the gaps. He also recalled

Balbir Singh and how Sonam had characterized him as a “big gun.” So the next morning, he called Balbir, who remembered Kohli from the Annapurna reception and invited him to his office. Once there, Kohli asked about job openings.

Sitting behind his desk, Balbir was his typical animated self. “Kohli, can you handle a rifle?”

“I think I can,” was his truthful and qualified reply. “I took the weapons course during naval training.”

Apparently satisfied, Balbir filled Kohli in on the budding ITBP. Balbir believed there would be plenty of mountaineering opportunities with the unit, and he asked if Kohli was interested. Within hours, Kohli’s assignment to the textile mills was canceled, and he was seconded to the paramilitary ITBP.

From the perspective of a mountaineer, it was a dream assignment. Eight ITBP battalions had been authorized in the Indian order of battle, and for the second half of 1963, Kohli was tasked with introducing mountaineering into their core curriculum. As his first step, he looked to hire a cadre of Sherpas. With the help of Tenzing Norgay—the famed Sherpa who had accompanied Sir Edmund Hillary on the first ascent to the Everest summit—Kohli visited the hill town of Darjeeling and hired several of Tenzing’s more eminent peers.

For the next year, Kohli was on hand as the ITBP cycled its members through various aspects of snowcraft, survival, and rock climbing. Then on 15 August 1964 came news that he had been chosen to lead the third Indian attempt on Mount Everest. With selecting the team, training for the climb, and procuring equipment, he would need an extended leave of absence from the ITBP, and he sought an audience with Balbir Singh to seek his approval.

“Sir, I need a full year off from the ITBP,” Kohli said gently.

“A full year?” Balbir was not amused. “You might as well go back to the navy.”

Dejected, Kohli headed back to his ITBP office, but when he got there, all disappointment vanished. He received word that Balbir not only had approved the one-year leave but also had made provisions for a jeep and an office to remain at his disposal for the duration.

While Kohli had been busy working with the ITBP through the first three quarters of 1964, the other covert programs initiated in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian conflict were making strong gains. Although a repeat of the 1962 cross-border attack by China was now seen as less likely, an even more frightening scenario was looming on the horizon. China's nuclear scientists, working behind closed doors since 1955, appeared to be making significant headway toward developing an atomic weapon.

For the U.S. government, the specter of a Chinese bomb was of major concern for several reasons. First and most obvious was fear over its potential use in an Asian war, especially with the Vietnam conflict escalating by the month. Second, Beijing could use nuclear saber rattling to sow rifts among America's regional allies. Third, a successful nuclear test could be spun into a major propaganda victory by China, heightening its profile as a regional military power and economic model.

So great was this concern that Washington had spent years contemplating ways of destroying or delaying Beijing's progress toward developing nuclear weapons. Some of these plans were of a decidedly proactive nature. A still classified November 1963 memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for example, refers to "Unconventional Warfare Program Bravo" with regard to countering China's tests. In a Machiavellian twist, another plan hinted at potential joint action with the Soviet Union to enforce a Chinese test ban.[4]

Still other plans sought to involve India. As early as February 1961, a secret U.S. Air Force study advocated nuclear weapons dispersal to U.S. allies and other potential cooperators in the region, including India. Later that same year, George McGhee, director of the Policy Planning Council at

the State Department, wrote a memo to Secretary of State Dean Rusk noting that one way to reduce the political impact of a Chinese bomb was to encourage, even assist, India in testing a device first. A noncommunist Asian state might then "beat Communist China to the punch." As is now known, these ideas were never acted on.[5]

For its part, India needed no prompting from the United States to recognize the potential danger from a Chinese bomb. Fears were driven home in 1963 when a Japanese parliamentary delegation visited New Delhi. In a meeting with ARC director Kao, the parliamentarians spoke fearfully about suspected advances in Beijing's atomic program.[6] Though New Delhi shared Japan's concerns, there was little solid evidence at that time of the progress China had actually made. Beijing did not offer press releases about its nuclear development, and no foreign nation—not the United States, not India, and not even the Republic of China on Taiwan—had a reliable network of agents on the mainland.

This meant that one of the few ways of gleaning information was to peer from afar by technical means. One option available to the United States was satellite photography. But even though notable advances had been made, satellites during that era were limited in number and lacking in resolution. Another U.S. option, the U-2 spy plane, had its own set of problems. Because China's test sites were believed to be concentrated in distant Xinjiang, spy planes launched from airstrips on Taiwan did not have the range to make the round-trip. The CIA had earlier made discreet use of an airfield at Peshawar, Pakistan, which would put Xinjiang within range, but that had ended after the diplomatic furor following the 1960 shoot-down over the Soviet Union of a U-2 launched from Peshawar.

Into the fray stepped India. Not only was India within range of Xinjiang; it also had a vested interest in learning as much as possible about the status of China's nuclear program. The CIA had already helped establish ARC, which (with Biju Patnaik's support and patronage) included making a special ARC air base at Charbatia in the state of Orissa. When the agency appealed for use of Charbatia as a U-2 staging facility, India agreed to a trial run.

In May 1964, a small CIA team arrived in Orissa with an unmarked spy plane. As planned, the plane performed a single mission over Xinjiang and headed back for Charbatia. As it touched down, however, its brakes failed, and the U-2 rolled off the end of the runway. Afraid of media exposure, ARC personnel manhandled the aircraft into a hangar—not an easy feat, given its massive wingspan—and waited for CIA technicians to make the necessary repairs. Once they were completed, the plane was

discreetly flown out without attempting further overflights from Indian soil.[7]

Five months later, the desert sands of Xinjiang rippled as China detonated its first nuclear device on 16 October. “This is a major achievement of the Chinese people,” went Beijing’s immediate press statement, “in their struggle to . . . oppose the U.S. imperialist policy of nuclear blackmail and nuclear threats.”[8]

Thirsty for detailed information about the blast, the U.S. intelligence community went into overdrive. Taking the lead was the U.S. Air Force Technical Applications Center, an organization whose sole task was to operate a global network of nuclear-event detection sensors to monitor nuclear programs. Eleven of its thirteen worldwide electromagnetic pulse stations, as well as seven of its acoustic stations, provided data on the timing and yield estimate of the Xinjiang explosion. Further information came from sorties flown by the center’s special aircraft, which collected traces of nuclear debris carried by the jet streams over Japan and Alaska.[9]

Based on all these data, the United States concluded that the first Chinese bomb had been relatively small at about twenty-five kilotons. Moreover, it was not thought suitable for delivery by missile. Still, Washington hardly saw reason for cheer. Given China’s demonstrated willingness to make sacrifices for high-priority objectives, the United States believed that Beijing might be able to conduct a much more sophisticated thermonuclear test within four years. Moreover, China was known to be working on a missile with a medium-range (up to 1,020 nautical miles) capability; a Pentagon study written less than two weeks before the October test estimated that China might have nuclear-tipped warheads targeted against cities across Asia by 1970.[10]

Keeping track of China’s missile technology was even more challenging than monitoring its nuclear tests. Unlike bombs, rockets do not have acoustic or electromagnetic signatures that can be detected from afar,

nor do they release debris into the atmosphere that can be collected half a world away. Missile tests, however, do have an Achilles' heel. In order to monitor performance during such tests, rockets are rigged to radio data so that scientists and engineers can gauge things like pressure, temperature, direction, and fuel consumption. In short, this telemetry provides a blueprint on the capabilities of a delivery system. What's more, these transmissions are vulnerable to eavesdropping. In June 1962, the United States successfully launched its first Ferret satellite. Little more than a large antenna in the sky, it was capable of listening in on telephone conversations, as well as taped missile telemetry. This was supplemented by a series of ground-based dishes operated by the U.S. Air Force that focused exclusively on picking up remote telemetry signals.

There were drawbacks to both these eavesdropping systems, however. Just as with other kinds of spy satellites, there were few Ferrets in operation, and they made only brief passes over China; the chance of one being over a target during a missile launch was exceedingly slim. In addition, the existing ground-based systems were too far away to offer good coverage of China's likely missile test path between Gansu and Xinjiang provinces.[11] The closest existing site, established in 1959 at Badaber, Pakistan, was well positioned to pick up leaked transmissions from Soviet launches, but mountains and the curvature of the earth degrigated transmissions from Chinese tests.

It was at this point that LeMay and Bishop met at that fateful cocktail party, and the idea of a remote sensor planted high in the Himalayas took shape. Given the altitude, the Himalayas would offer far better line-of-sight coverage than Badaber did. And as a stationary device, a Himalayan sensor would offer more than the fleeting coverage possible from a satellite.

There remained the issue of selling the idea to the Indians. Because the CIA had been handling joint covert programs for the past two years, the project was turned over to the agency. And since ARC director Kao had

been the primary point of contact for joint projects, it was with him that the CIA first broached the subject. The gravity of the plan caught him off guard. “I was not authorized to sanction such an important mission,” recalled Kao, “so I passed the message to Mullik.”[12]

By that time, Mullik had lost his primary patron in Nehru (the prime minister had passed away in the spring) and had been replaced as director of the Intelligence Bureau. Still, he retained control over covert paramilitary projects focused against China—ARC, Uban’s commandos, and the SSB. A sensor mission in the Himalayas fell under his purview, and after listening to the concept, he was agreeable in theory.

With this tacit green light, the CIA began to delve into the details. Because of his mountaineering background, Barry Bishop was retained by the agency to help select a suitable site. Some of the parameters for his choice were dictated by geopolitics, others by technical considerations. For security reasons, it could not be located in an area where it might be vulnerable to a Chinese cross-border raid; nor could it be completely outside of Indian jurisdiction. This discounted peaks that shared a common border with Tibet or mountains in Nepal or Bhutan. It also needed to be as high as possible to allow an unobstructed view toward Xinjiang; this excluded a number of peaks further removed from the Indo-Tibetan frontier. By process of elimination, Bishop arrived at Kanchenjunga as his mountain of choice. It was sufficiently tall, it shared a border with Sikkim (which was effectively under the control of India), and it was not on the Tibetan frontier. The CIA’s technicians concurred with the pick.

Because the sensor would be placed in Indian-controlled territory, diplomacy—even covert diplomacy—called for a joint climb using both U.S. and Indian mountaineers. It was at this point that Bishop ventured to New Delhi in February 1965 to sound out India’s best climbers. But because they were all preoccupied with the upcoming Everest expedition, he could do little more than indirectly broach the subject with Kohli, who

departed for Nepal none the wiser. Bishop, meanwhile, was tasked by the CIA to assemble the American component for the intended assault on Kanchenjunga.

For Bishop, time was of the essence. On 14 May, China detonated its second nuclear device in Xinjiang. This time, the bomb was dropped by an aircraft over the test range (the first had been placed in a tower); it was about double the size of the first device and contained some thermonuclear material.[13] Given that a missile test could not be too far away, the U.S. government wanted the mountaintop monitoring device in place during that calendar year. In addition, because climbing seasons are circumscribed by weather, Bishop needed to have his expedition atop Kanchenjunga by fall at the latest. After that, snow and cold weather would make climbing suicidal. This left him with just a few weeks to identify and recruit five expert American mountaineers.

The requirements for selection were simple. The candidate had to have an outstanding mountaineering history, he had to be able to maintain confidentiality, and he had to be willing to do the job for only token pay. The CIA had arranged for a nominal salary of $1,000 a month at least through the fall. Although many top climbers were used to sacrificing their paying jobs during the summer climbing season, the financial burden might be too great for those who were married with families.

To help make his selection, Bishop sought advice from James McCarthy. An excellent climber from the eastern United States—in contrast to the majority of top American climbers at the time, who hailed from the West—McCarthy was a practicing lawyer and served on the council of the American Alpine Club. From his own climbing experience and his networking within the club, there were few experienced U.S. mountaineers that McCarthy did not know personally.

Bishop's first choice required little thought. At twenty-six years old, Luther "Lute" Jerstad had been with Bishop on the 1963 Everest mission.

His participation on that team reflected his impressive accomplishments at a young age. Climbing in the state of Washington since a teen, he had performed thirty-five ascents of Mount Rainier while serving as a summer climbing guide. With additional experience in Alaska, Colorado, Oregon, and the Yukon, his mastery of snow and ice had earned him the Everest slot.

During that expedition, Bishop and Jerstad had struggled arm in arm toward the summit. They had been successful, even taking the first motion pictures from the top, but they suffered tremendously on the way down. Dehydrated from heavy breathing and the low humidity, hypoxic from the lack of oxygen, and with their eyes hemorrhaging from the stinging wind, they barely made it back to base camp—and only then at the cost of Bishop's frostbitten toes.

Since that climb, Jerstad had returned to the University of Oregon, where he was both working as a speech instructor and finishing a doctoral degree in theater. Though he was married and had a child, he was intrigued by the scant details provided by Bishop and calculated that he had the time to spare. The Kanchenjunga team had its first member.

It was Jerstad who suggested the next candidate. Gil Blinn, a fellow trail guide from Mount Rainier, had been drafted into the army in late 1961 and missed out on the chance to compete for a berth on the Everest team. After his military service he returned to Rainier, where he clocked a speed record up its side that would stand for two decades. He had briefly met Bishop when the latter was on pre-Everest rehearsals. Blinn was still working at Rainier, now as a ranger, when a telephone call came from Jerstad.

"He asked me to come down for a night to the University of Oregon campus at Eugene," recalls Blinn. After a short pitch, the team had its second member.[14]

McCarthy suggested the next two names. The first was Tom Frost. Clean-cut and perpetually optimistic, Frost had been a champion sailboat

racer in his early twenties. It was on sheer rock walls, however, that he became a living legend. By 1960, he was considered among the top "cragrats," an elite breed of climbers that challenged the cliffs of California's Yosemite. On these monoliths—Sentinel Rock, El Capitan, the Salathe Wall, to name a few—he pioneered bold routes that defied gravity and pushed the envelope of human endurance.[15] Frost's crowning ascent had been in October 1964. Along with three of the best technical rock climbers in the United States—and probably the world—he had prepared for a ten-day route up Yosemite's unclimbed North American Wall. It entailed hours of detailed planning to weave a path along the granite, leveraging through cracks and spidering across overhangs in an exhausting aerial ballet. Leaving on the last day of the month, they reached their goal with half a day to spare.

Following that climb, Frost had left Yosemite to concentrate on designing mountaineering equipment. An aerospace engineer by education, he had a pronounced creative streak. That, combined with his understanding of the needs of rock climbers, led him to invent a range of revolutionary devices, such as an extremely wide-angle piton fashioned from aluminum. For all his talents, however, Frost had one drawback. Technical climbers who focused on rock were a far different breed from alpinists who climbed on ice and snow. The first were spindly strategists challenged by gravity; the second were dogged survivalists facing the worst nature had to offer. Few of the former crossed over to join the latter. Though Frost had made some forays into the high mountains, extreme altitudes were not his forte. Still, McCarthy felt that his brilliance on rock added a unique dimension to the burgeoning squad. A phone call later, Frost was on board.

McCarthy's second call went to Harthon "Sandy" Bill. The son of a senior official in the National Park Service, Bill had considerable climbing experience in both Europe and the Pacific Northwest. When McCarthy made the offer, he volunteered without hesitation.[16]

To round out the team, Bishop needed a medical doctor who could climb. Most major expeditions had such a member, but they were a rare breed. By definition, a doctor needed to focus on his schooling and practice; most did not have the hours and energy to devote to a time-consuming sport like mountaineering. But there were exceptions. During the 1963 Everest mission, the expedition had been selflessly supported by David Dingman. It was Dingman, in fact, who had searched for Bishop and Jerstad during their horrifying descent. But Dingman was married with children, and he was in medical residency. He could hardly be pulled away again after having spent months on leave for the Everest climb.

Looking for other options, Bishop eventually found Robert Schaller. A track star in college (he had been one of America's top milers during the 1950s), thirty-year-old Schaller was in surgical residency in Seattle. He had been on several noteworthy climbs and knew the basics of high-altitude medicine. He also had an interest in electronics. Better still, he was unmarried with no dependents. A CIA representative was dispatched to Seattle to make the pitch directly to Schaller. Like the others, the doctor was intrigued with the prospect of a secret government-funded expedition. When he agreed to go to Washington for further discussions, the representative reached into a pocket and pushed a plane ticket into his hand. Said Schaller, "It was all very cloak and dagger."[17]

By the close of May, the entire team had assembled at Barry Bishop's house in Bethesda, Maryland. For most, it was a time to renew old friendships. For a few, like Schaller, it was an opportunity to make new acquaintances.

Bishop quickly got down to business and provided more details about their intended mission to Kanchenjunga. Under the best of circumstances, Kanchenjunga was a horrendous climb. At 28,146 feet, it was exceeded in altitude only by Everest and Pakistan's K2. With avalanches aggravated by monsoons whipping its base, it was widely considered among the world's

most hazardous peaks. Two British parties had reached within twenty feet of its summit in 1955 (the Sikkimese authorities asked climbers to stop just short of the top to appease the gods), but it had not been attempted again in the intervening decade. Adding to the challenge, Bishop reminded them, was their special load. Although specifics were not offered, they could expect to be additionally burdened by heavy and delicate equipment that required assembly at an extreme altitude. If that were not enough, they would be doing the mission in conjunction with Indian climbers who had not yet been selected.

For the next two weeks, the team studied the technical aspects of the climb. As the U.S. government would be footing the bill, Bishop was given carte blanche to order the best gear available. For the most part, he used the same equipment—parkas, tents, cameras—that had proved worthy during the Everest expedition.[18]

By mid-June, preparations for Kanchenjunga were finalized. Before departing for India, however, Bishop wanted to conduct a trial run closer to home to put their gear, stamina, and camaraderie through the paces. Before the Everest expedition, Mount Rainier had been chosen as a testing ground. But two of the members—Jerstad and Blinn—had spent years at that mountain and were too familiar with its idiosyncrasies. Looking for an alternative that would push them all to their limits, Bishop looked to Alaska. Mount McKinley, he decided, fit the bill.

4. Memorandum, General Maxwell D. Taylor, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Chinese Nuclear Development,” 18 November 1963, on file at the National Archives, Record Group 218, Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Chairman’s files (Maxwell D. Taylor), box 1, CM-1963; General Curtis LeMay, Acting Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, to Secretary of Defense, “Study of Chinese Communist Vulnerability,” 29 April 1963, RG 59, Records of Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of the Country Director

for the Republic of China, Top Secret Files Relating to the Republic of China, 1954–65, box 4.

5. Memorandum, Lt. General John K. Gerhart, Deputy Chief of Staff, Plans & Programs, U.S. Air Force, to Air Force Chief of Staff Thomas White, "Long-Range Threat of Communist China," 8 February 1961, Library of Congress, Thomas White Papers, box 44, Air Staff Actions; William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson, "A Chinese Puzzle," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (1997).

6. Interview with R. N. Kao, 21 March 2001.

7. Given Indian reluctance to attempt more U-2 flights from Charbatia, the CIA was again faced with the problem of finding a suitable spy plane launch site within range of Xinjiang. In the fall of 1964, when a Chinese atomic test was thought imminent, the agency received permission to stage a single aircraft from Takhli air base in Thailand. To add plausible deniability, it was to be flown by a Nationalist Chinese aircrew. Although the U-2 was at Takhli by late September, it had yet to fly its first mission by the time the Chinese detonated their first device on 16 October. Because a Xinjiang overflight was then considered less pressing, the U-2 returned from Takhli to Taiwan in early November, taking it over several southern Chinese provinces en route. At that point, India reconsidered its ban and in December allowed a single CIA-piloted U-2 to briefly stage from Charbatia. Interview with Li-Yi "Jack" Chang, 7 March 2001.

8. Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), East Asia edition, 16 October 1964, p. BBB1.

9. "History of the Air Force Technical Applications Center, 1 July–31 December 1964," chap. 3, pp. 11, 12, 27.

1. Though not officially promoted to two stars while in the military, Uban's position as inspector general with the Tibetan commandos was deemed equivalent to the rank of major general; when he unofficially conferred this rank on himself, there was no opposition.

2. Interview with M. K. Anand, 11 February 2001. Anand attended CIA paramilitary training in 1963; three years later, a CIA adviser qualified him as India's first free-fall parachutist. He went on to set a national free-fall record (25,000 feet) and was leader of the Indian Army–Air Force skydiving team that took part in the 1976 International Skydiving Championship at Tula in the Soviet Union.

3. On paper, the ITBP was a central police formation under the Home Ministry. However, in a testament to his wide-ranging powers, Mullik and his Intelligence Bureau directly supervised the ITBP for its first few years.

11. China had an active guided-missile program since about 1958. With Soviet assistance (prior to the Sino-Soviet schism), the Chinese constructed a missile test range head at Shuang-cheng-tzu in Gansu. The missile impact zone was in the deserts of Xinjiang. "CIA report, subj: Science and Technology in Communist China," 28 January 1966, Declassified Documents Reference System (DDRS), #0606-1998, p. 7.

12. Kao interview.

13. "CIA report," DDRS, #0606-1998, p. 6. There was an unfounded claim in the Japanese media that the second Chinese device had been delivered by a missile; this was officially denied by Beijing on 17 May. See FBIS, East Asia edition, 18 May 1965, p. CCC1.

14. Interview with Gil Blinn, 17 September 2000.

10. “China as a Nuclear Power (Some Thoughts Prior to the Chinese Test),” 7 October 1964, prepared by the Office of International Security Affairs, Department of Defense.

15. Frost’s Yosemite climbs are detailed in Steve Roper, Camp 4 (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1994).

16. Interview with Harthon Bill, 9 October 2000.

17. Interview with Robert Schaller, 30 August 2000.

18. Journalist Howard Kohn claimed that the U.S. and Indian mountaineers trained for the mission at a CIA facility at Harvey Point, North Carolina. This is unfounded. Howard Kohn, “The Nanda Devi Caper,” Outside (May 1978), p. 27.

CHAPTER THREE

McKinley

Though designated as practice, the assault on 20,320-foot Mount McKinley promised to be grueling. Named after the U.S. president assassinated in 1901, McKinley is infamous for the violent weather that whips its slopes. It is routinely pummeled by storms blowing in from the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea, and the surrounding skies are apt to change dramatically in minutes. McKinley is also intensely cold. Temperatures near the summit, even in the middle of summer, are often twenty to forty degrees below zero, or lower, at night. By comparison, the Himalayas seem tropical. Some of the world's best climbers have just disappeared or been flash frozen on its slopes.

McKinley has one other inhospitable feature. It is the highest point near the Arctic Circle, and barometric pressures on McKinley are lower for a given altitude than on mountains closer to the equator. Lower barometric pressure means less oxygen in the air, which means that mountaineers are more susceptible to hypoxia. Depending on weather conditions, the McKinley summit can be roughly equivalent to a 23,000-foot climb in the Himalayas.

Despite these features—or perhaps because of them—about 1,000 climbers attempt McKinley annually. For almost a century, the average success rate to the summit has been 50 percent. Of those expeditions that are successful, most take at least twenty-one days, most use the West Buttress Route, and most begin the attempt by early June, before the relatively warm temperatures in July and August, and therefore the danger of avalanches, add to the difficulty. Bishop and his men would flaunt all these principles. Arriving in Alaska in mid-June, they intended to use

McKinley's South Face, an extremely hazardous approach that had been successfully completed only a handful of times.

McKinley's infamous weather, meanwhile, was proving less than cooperative. Flying into Elmendorf Air Force Base on the outskirts of Anchorage, the team was forced to wait through the last week of June while storms blanketed their target. Beset by boredom, the climbers spent their days at the officers' club or playing sports. During a particularly intense volleyball game, Rob Schaller fell and twisted his knee. Rushed to the base hospital, he was declared out of contention for the McKinley climb.

Having suddenly lost their team doctor, Bishop scrambled for a replacement. Thinking back, he recalled a young medical student named Dan Wolfe who had an interest in climbing. Networking through friends, he discovered that Wolfe had finished medical school the previous year and was interning in Denver.

Wolfe, by coincidence, had just volunteered for military service. "Bishop called one evening," he recalled, "and I told him that I was packing to go into the U.S. Air Force."

"I'm pretty sure I can get you a deferment," promised Bishop.

The next day, Wolfe was at Elmendorf, meeting the rest of the climbers. Though spirits were high, concern was starting to mount that they had delayed too long into summer.

Finally, the weather cleared on 30 June. To make up for lost time, the team received rare permission to land by fixed-wing aircraft within the national park, then take a helicopter shuttle to the glacier at the base of the mountain. This would shave considerable time off the normal hike from the park boundary.

The following morning, Bishop and Jerstad (named coleaders of the climb) stood with Bill, Blinn, Frost, and Wolfe on the Elmendorf tarmac. James McCarthy, who had helped Bishop select the team, was joining them in Alaska as the seventh member. Their gear had been specially procured by

Bishop. The down parkas, wind pants, and down mittens had all been field-tested during the 1963 Everest climb and were considered cutting edge for the time. Also as used on Everest were their two-man and four-man assault tents featuring external aluminum trapezoidal frames. Bishop had helped design the tents, and the Eureka Tent and Awning Company made them to his specifications, along with a six-man umbrella tent for use as a base camp. In addition, Bishop gave each climber an Olympus Pen-S camera. Able to take seventy-two frames on a thirty-six-exposure roll of film, it required changing film canisters only half as often as a standard 35mm camera.

Half the climbers boarded an L-20 Beaver light aircraft and flew north out of Elmendorf toward Mount McKinley National Park. Once the peak appeared in the distance, the pilot vectored toward a small dirt strip cut into the tundra within the park boundary and landed with a bounce. The men unloaded their gear, and the Beaver headed back to ferry the rest of the team.

Their pause was brief. By noon, two UH-1 helicopters materialized over the horizon, then settled next to the crude runway. Though it would soon become a familiar feature in the skies over Vietnam, in 1965 the UH-1 was a newcomer to the U.S. Air Force. Elmendorf had been supplied with several of them the previous year to service early-warning radar sites spread across Alaska.

Piling aboard, the team braced as the pilots nosed up from the tundra and headed directly for McKinley.

Arthur Davidson had good reason for frustration. A week earlier, he and five Japanese teammates had started up McKinley's South Face with high hopes. They got as high as 15,570 feet when the mountain suddenly turned vengeful. "It was horrifying," remembered Davidson. All around, the slopes were getting raked by slab avalanches while melting snow opened gaping fissures across their path. "It was well beyond our abilities."[1] Worse

for Davidson, the Japanese rations packed by his team were taxing his palate and sapping his energy. Heavy on nori (dried seaweed) and rice, the food had started to give the lone American severe stomach cramps.

On 1 July, he and his fellow climbers saw little choice but to make a tactical retreat to the 9,000-foot level near the base of the glacier abutting McKinley. Exhausted, Davidson relished the momentary pause as they contemplated a new path up the side. But in the distance, the sound of helicopter blades disturbed Davidson's rest. Two choppers flew nearly over his base camp before settling in a nearby clearing. Minutes later, the helicopters were airborne again and fading into the distance.

Knowing the restrictions against aircraft encroaching in the national park, much less landing on McKinley, Davidson's interest was piqued. Setting out for the clearing, he arrived twenty minutes later and startled a group of seven climbers. His curiosity only deepened when he saw who they were. "I had not previously met any of them," said Davidson, "but I knew them by reputation, and that they were among the best mountaineers of the time." The clothes of the seven were also remarkable. "I was wearing torn sweats," Davidson remembered. "They had great boots and high-quality down, which was rare in those days."

Approaching the group, Davidson introduced himself. McCarthy and Frost were personable, though he found the rest rather tight lipped. All were breathing hard as they set up their dome tent and took inventory of their supplies. That evening, Davidson enticed the newcomers to the Japanese encampment. Swapping rations, he quickly devoured some of their Western fare; in return, Wolfe got nori and Bill a plate of rice.[2]

Most expeditions take up to two weeks to acclimatize before scaling McKinley. Competing with the calendar, Bishop and his men were setting out the very next morning. Even after listening to the tales of hardship endured by the Japanese, they were hardly fazed. "Most of our members," recalled Wolfe, "were pretty gung-ho."

Three days later, Bishop's men were getting a brutal taste of what had stymied Davidson's team. Inching their way up to the 14,000-foot mark, they camped near a bergshrund, the top crevasse formed where the glacier tears away from the side of the mountain. Each noon, the summer heat was making the slopes inherently unstable, and avalanching became frequent, almost hourly. Every night, wind and snow buffeted their tents, threatening to split the nylon outer shells.

By day eight, they had barely made any further progress. Wolfe and Blinn tried to fix safety ropes to extend their route but were stopped in their tracks by the elements. The failed effort left Wolfe spent. "I had not done rock climbing for a long time," he confessed. "When I did Rainier and the Canadian Alps, it was way back in the fifties."

The others in the team were faring no better. By day ten, with the frequent avalanching increasing the chance of a fatality, Bishop and Jerstad prudently called a premature end to the mission. The South Face, and the weather, had defeated America's best.

M. S. Kohli

For India, and especially for Kohli, the third time proved a charm. On 20 May, India's first two summiteers stood atop Everest and planted the country's tricolor. Two days later, a second pair of climbers reached the peak. Another two days after that, they completed the hat trick by putting a third pair of Indian summiteers on top. Finally, on 29 May, a last team of three climbers peered down from Everest. India was the fourth country to scale the peak—after the British, Swiss, and Americans—and had done it four times in ten days.

To say that India was electrified by the Everest success would be an understatement. A massive crowd, led by acting Prime Minister Gulzari Lal Nanda, was waiting for the team along the runway when it arrived at New Delhi's Palam airfield on 23 June. It was a heady moment, with a major nationwide tour promised for the coming weeks. The climbers were allowed to take their spouses along for the festivities, so several of the bachelors on the team were planning to quickly marry their sweethearts.

The celebration, it turned out, was fleeting. No sooner had Kohli offered his thanks to the crowd assembled on the tarmac when he was tapped on the shoulder by Balbir Singh. Taking him aside, Singh asked Kohli to speak with ARC director Kao, who had positioned himself behind their DC-3. As usual, Kao was economic with his words. "Pack your bags," he told Kohli. Kohli would soon be leaving for the United States with a team of Indian climbers for specialized training. "Meet me first thing in the morning for more details," Kao finished.

Kao was equally brief when Kohli sat in his office at daybreak. An Indian team, said the ARC chief, would be trained in the United States to install a monitoring device on a major mountain peak. Kohli's departure, he added, would be within the week.

The seven-day deadline concerned Kohli. Not only would he miss a series of high-profile Everest celebrations, but he had no idea what kind of

preparations had already gone into selecting the team. He asked Kao for at least fifteen days to get ready, and reluctantly, Kao agreed.

The delay, Kohli soon discovered, was much needed. In a follow-on meeting, Kao informed him that not only would Kohli be the leader of the joint Indo-U.S. team, but he also had to pick his Indian counterparts, including a doctor.

Kohli did not have to look far for candidates. India's best climbers had been with him during the Everest mission, and most were close friends. Without hesitation, he mentally put four names on the short list. A quick pick was Harish Rawat, a mountaineer employed by the Intelligence Bureau. (Because the bureau was especially concerned about threats across India's mountainous northern frontier, it normally kept a stable of climbers on its roster.) Rawat's family had made mountaineering history in the nineteenth century. His grandfather and his grandfather's cousin had been pioneering employees of the Survey of India. They practiced their art with considerable bravery and a dash of espionage, because most of the Buddhist kingdoms along the Himalayas, especially Tibet, were extraordinarily xenophobic and would not allow interlopers, except those who came as religious pilgrims. Taking advantage of this loophole, Rawat's ancestors carried survey equipment disguised as religious items. Each had a Tibetan-style rosary, for example, but with only 100 beads instead of the customary 108. Every tenth bead was slightly larger, which allowed them to make discreet calculations of distance. Other instruments were carried hidden inside Tibetan prayer wheels. But this subterfuge barely lessened the danger they faced, and both were robbed and beaten on one foray into Tibet. Unfazed, Rawat's grandfather made a lone return to Tibet, this time disguised as a monk. After four years—during which time his family had given him up for dead—he returned to India with some of the most accurate cartographic sketches of Tibet made to that time.

Harish Rawat

Rawat had been born in one of the hill districts of Uttar Pradesh, not far from the Tibetan frontier. He was a devout Hindu, and for him, mountaineering was an almost religious undertaking; he had placed an image of the goddess Durga on Everest. Though the Sherpas called him Japani Saheb—a somewhat unkind reference to his short frame, slight paunch, and round, bespectacled face—Kohli knew him to be a smart, steady climber. Kohli also knew that Rawat's mettle was beyond reproach: during a 1964 expedition to Trisuli, Rawat fell more than 3,000 feet when he was swept off his feet by an avalanche, but after a perfunctory check for broken bones, he wasted no time scrambling to regain the lost altitude.

Kohli's second pick was Sonam Wangyal, a climbing protégé in the employ of the Intelligence Bureau. At the tender age of twenty-three, Wangyal had been the baby of the 1965 Everest mission and the youngest to reach the summit to that date. Coming from the hills of Ladakh, Wangyal

had climbing in his blood. While in junior high school, he heard his teachers waxing about the accomplishments of Hillary and Tenzing during the first Everest success, and he had devoted himself to mountaineering ever since.

Sonam Wangyal

Wangyal had several outstanding qualities that Kohli sought. Thoroughly trustworthy, utterly selfless, and impossible to anger, he was the consummate team player. He had no inflated ego, despite his significant accomplishments at an early age, and was equally at ease leading from the front, cooking food, or cleaning a tent. Wangyal also had physical power best described by superlatives. No doubt owing to his mountain upbringing, he took high altitudes and extreme privations in stride. He could sleep soundly without a mattress, and plummeting temperatures and stinging winds had no appreciable effect on his drive or strength. He possessed a seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy, and Kohli had yet to see him

reach his limit. During one famous episode, he had been blown into an impossibly deep crevasse, a predicament that would have killed most men. Freezing, injured, and without proper equipment, Wangyal somehow managed to work his way out of the chimney like a spider.

Kohli's third selectee was Gurcharan Bhangu. A turbaned Sikh like Kohli, Bhangu had first been introduced to climbing in 1958, when he did some trekking around the hills of Shimla, and he quickly impressed fellow climbers with his love of the mountains. Originally with the Punjab police, he had been assigned to the Intelligence Bureau since 1961 for communications work. As an expert wireless operator, he became a prized catch for major climbing expeditions. During the 1965 Everest mission, he had been in charge of radio transmissions and had excelled in the role.

Gurcharan Bhangu (right) views a scalp and hand purported to belong to a yeti during the approach march to Mount Everest, 1965.

Kohli's remaining pick was actually his top choice. Sonam Gyatso, forty-two, was a native of Sikkim and had grown up in the Himalayas. As a young man he had been a traveling cigarette salesman and would take lone treks to 15,000 feet each month to stay fit. He was deeply spiritual—he prayed thirty minutes each morning and wore amulets from a host of Tibetan incarnates—and communion with the peaks was an integral part of his life.

Sonam Gyatso

Looking for more substantial employment, Sonam answered a recruitment drive in 1949 for a new constabulary force that was being formed along the frontier. He excelled during training and became a head constable. For the next several years, Sonam alternated between further training stints and long inspection tours along the Sikkimese border. Not surprisingly, he eventually came to the attention of the Intelligence Bureau, which was always looking for good recruits among the border populations.

In the bureau, Sonam was encouraged to turn his love of trekking into a serious mountaineering career. In 1954, he passed the first basic course offered by the HMI and later participated in an advanced course to Nanda Devi. Though his team missed the summit by 500 feet, his impressive stamina had drawn attention. In 1958, his stature increased when he climbed Nepal's 26,750-foot Cho Oyu. This was the first successful Indian expedition to one of the Himalayan superpeaks, and Sonam had reached the summit without bottled oxygen.

In 1963, Sonam was chosen to head a new Mountaineering Institute in his native Sikkim. Unlike the HMI, Sonam's school was run by and for the Intelligence Bureau. Conducting three basic courses and one advanced course per year, its prime objective was to train personnel from the bureau to perform duties in the high Himalayas. Besides running the institute, Sonam continued to cement his reputation as one of India's premier mountaineers. Both he and Kohli had been on the 1960 and 1962 Everest teams; during the latter, they had the unpleasant experience of spending six nights in the death zone—two without bottled oxygen. They had also been together on the 1961 Annapurna III climb, during which Sonam had improbably insisted that the humming noise emanating from their goggles (most likely a reaction of the metal frames with nearby lightning) was caused by insects flying around his head. During the third attempt on Everest, he had persevered to the top despite excruciating frostbite across his back.

During this period, Sonam grew especially close to the Gyalwa Karmapa, the most senior lama in a lineage from the Black Hat sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Then in his sixteenth rebirth, the Karmapa had fled Tibet in 1959 just as the Chinese army seized full control. Given an auspicious plot of land (seven streams flowed toward it, and seven hills faced it) near Gangtok by the crown prince of Sikkim, the exiled lama had established an extremely large monastery. Sonam was a frequent visitor and

got to know the Karmapa well. Without exception, Sonam would tie prayer flags blessed by the Karmapa to his tent and rucksack when climbing major peaks. He had also drawn on the Karmapa's blessing to make it to the top of Everest.

Besides Sonam's stamina, fortitude, and formidable climbing résumé, Kohli wanted him on the team because of his infectious enthusiasm. Known for his love of food (he was perpetually hungry), drink (he once imbibed several mugs of beer prior to a reception with Nehru), and sleep (his snoring was legendary), Sonam was a prolific storyteller, always cheerful, and able to establish close rapport with Sherpas and porters. In short, he was the perfect expedition companion.

Although Kao was dealing with Kohli directly, it was understood that B. N. Mullik, the former intelligence chief, was maintaining a deep personal interest in the sensor project. It was Mullik, in fact, who dictated the inclusion of two others on the team. One was Devi Singh Sisodia, a mountaineer and member of the Delhi police force on assignment to the Intelligence Bureau; he had been on the tryouts for the Everest climb but did not make the final cut. The second was Pedro Tripathi, a practicing physician who was serving with the SSB. Mullik knew and trusted both men.

On the morning of 19 July, twenty-six days after his triumphant return to New Delhi, Kohli and his six new teammates were back at the international terminal at Palam airfield. In a hint of things to come, they were discreetly whisked to the tarmac after the rest of the passengers had boarded the Air India flight. With the exception of their climbs in Nepal and a French mountaineering meet attended by Sonam, none of them had previously ventured overseas, and anxiety was running high.

That same afternoon, they landed at London's Heathrow airport to refuel. The flight attendant doted on them during the layover, having been instructed to make sure that they did not stray or otherwise get into trouble.

When they landed in New York, they were met by a rather colorless U.S. government representative who appropriately introduced himself as “Mr. Gray.” They were taken to the King Crown Hotel in lower Manhattan and were shown around the city the next day to shake off their jetlag. Then they drove down to Washington with a different American escort officer, a “Mr. Mac.” After a lightning tour of the White House and Lincoln Memorial, they were back in a plane and heading for Elmendorf Air Force Base.

At the officers’ club, the Indians spent the afternoon making introductions. On hand were Bishop (he exchanged knowing glances with Kohli), Jerstad, Frost, Blinn, Wolfe, and the recuperating Schaller. Sandy Bill and James McCarthy had already left Alaska. Also joining them at Elmendorf were two representatives from the CIA. Case officer William McKniff was an affable China specialist from the agency’s Far East Division. He had just completed a posting in Hong Kong the previous summer and had been tasked to manage the Kanchenjunga project. Gordon Sleeper was the CIA technician responsible for the monitoring device itself.

With introductions over, talk shifted to the mission at hand. Though the Indians were still recovering from the Everest climb, there was some discussion over whether they should make a practice attempt up McKinley. Instead of the suicidal South Face, they would use the relatively kinder West Buttress route. Though not nearly as technically difficult, even the West Buttress was considered extraordinarily dangerous that late in the summer. The climbers agreed to sleep on the decision and retired to their rooms.

The next morning, they gathered back at the club to continue talks. Kohli noticed that Wangyal was looking particularly haggard. It turned out that he had stared out his window waiting for darkness, and it had been a very long wait. It was then explained to Wangyal that the sun sets late near the Arctic, and he would need to draw the curtains if he wanted more than a couple hours’ sleep.

Though a West Buttress assault had not been ruled out, bad weather over the next three days prevented serious thought of a climb. The time did not go to waste, however. Sleeper, the CIA technician, had brought along a mockup of the monitoring device. Shuttling out to a remote part of the air base, they began to familiarize themselves with the hardware. There were four major components to the sensor, all connected by streams of wires and cables. Two of the pieces were little more than metal boxes placed atop posts to keep them off the snow and ice. These were the transceivers—labeled B1 and B2—that would relay the collated missile information to a base station elsewhere in India. The third component was the collection antenna that would snatch the telemetry data from the Chinese missiles. The six-foot-tall antenna looked like the standard television aerial found atop many American homes. The final component, by contrast, looked far more exotic. Officially called a SNAP 19C (short for system for nuclear auxiliary power), it was a thermoelectric generator capable of forty watts of continuous output for two years. Deriving its power from heat generated by radioactive decay, the SNAP was meant for use in devices placed at remote, unattended locations for extended periods. This was the first time it was being incorporated into a mountaintop sensor, but various classes of the system had already been successfully integrated into U.S. government meteorological stations, as lights on buoys, and in satellites.

From a distance, the SNAP resembled a metallic mushroom. The heart of the system was a hexagonal block of graphite. Seven small rods, termed fuel capsules, went into holes drilled around the block, with one hole along the axis and six around it. The seven capsules together contained 1,734 grams of plutonium, mainly the Pu-238 isotope. The block was sheathed in a squat, cylindrical aluminum container. Forty-five aluminum fins were arrayed around it to dissipate heat more effectively. The SNAP was then mounted on a single post, forming the “stem” of the mushroom.

For their tarmac exercises, the climbers had the entire device except for functioning fuel rods. Over the next several days, they practiced unpacking the components, fixing posts and stabilizing wires in the ground, and connecting cables. They also did drills on aligning the antenna and doing a systems check of the receivers.

On the morning of 27 July, the weather finally proved cooperative. Although they had ruled out a climb by that late date, both Indian and American climbers donned their snow gear and placed the disassembled sensor into an L-20 Beaver. As they took off for the dirt runway near McKinley, Kohli was struck by Alaska's natural beauty along the way. "The skies were completely free of pollution," he recalled, "and we were able to catch a glimpse of a massive bull moose."

Switching to a pair of UH-1 choppers, they were taken to an expansive snowfield in the shadow of McKinley. The weather was extraordinarily cold and crisp, and the sky was clear. Over the next three days, they again practiced assembling the device on the snowfield, only this time under more natural conditions and encumbered by thick parkas and mittens. They also used the time to familiarize themselves with their climbing gear and train in the use of explosive charges in the event they needed to blast out a shelf to secure the sensor atop Kanchenjunga.

By the end of the third day, Kohli had started to develop an uneasy feeling. Doing a rough mental calculation, he figured that the combined 125 pounds of sensor gear would require at least four climbers to haul at high altitude. In addition, it had taken about two hours to properly assemble the device on a level snowfield. From what he knew of Kanchenjunga, it was a monstrous climb under the best of circumstances, without carrying extra equipment. Even if they could get near the required altitude, they would be lucky to spend forty minutes on top doing minimal chores, not two hours assembling a sensor. Kohli decided that it would be undiplomatic for him to

share these concerns with his U.S. colleagues, however. Instead, he would wait until he got back to India.

Erecting the sensor antenna in the snowfield near Mount McKinley, July 1965. Visible atop poles on the left are transceivers B-1 and B-2.

The choppers came to fetch them on 30 July to return them to Elmendorf, where the Indians bid temporary farewell to their American counterparts. The latter flew to their respective homes, while the former spent the next two days raiding the base's department store. With its subsidized prices and their per diem, the Indians were able to load up on a number of bargains not available in India. Sisodia was such a frequent customer that they gave him an apropos nickname: "Mister PX."

Courtesy of the CIA, the Indians were treated to an extra eleven days spent touring America, accompanied by their aloof chaperone, Mr. Mac, and case officer Bill McKniff. The CIA apparently wanted to ensure that they had a good impression of the United States, and if that was the goal, it succeeded. For the next week, they took a slow car journey down the West Coast. Along the way, they were feted by Barry Bishop and his wife, along with Lute Jerstad and his wife. At various beach stops, they sang, played volleyball, and held rugby matches.

By week's end, the group was in San Francisco. In a brief misstep, their hosts took them to some crass strip clubs, which grated against Indian cultural sensitivities. They were also taken to an Indian restaurant for a welcome dose of home cooking. When their favorite dishes were not on the menu, however, they made the disappointing discovery that the restaurant's specialization did not extend beyond the marquee: the cook was black, the owner was British, and the receptionist—a tall Sikh—was a part-time student from Berkeley.

Flying out of California, the Indians went back to Washington for a couple more days of sightseeing. Although the counterculture was still several years off, both Bhangu and Kohli were accosted at Lafayette Park across from the White House. Seeing their turbans, several free-spirited girls asked if they were swamis and, if so, did they have hashish? The two Indians had to disappoint them on both counts.

Escort officer "Mac" (fourth from left) with the Indian mountaineers at the New York World's Fair, 10 August 1965.

On 10 August, they headed for New York to finish off their U.S. trip with an excursion to the 1965 World's Fair. After that, it was time to retrace

their flight aboard Air India. When boarding was called, Kohli did a quick head count and found that they were short one member. Mr. Mac was hovering nearby, having clung to them like a shadow for the entire stay. Assuming that he did not understand Punjabi, the Sikh members had taken to making fun of him in their language, and it was in that tongue that they began cursing their missing member. Mac then spoke up, telling them not to worry because their teammate was in the bathroom. The Indians fell silent, wondering if they had underestimated Mac's linguistic abilities and he had been eavesdropping on their conversations all along.

Three days later, Kohli was sitting in Director Kao's New Delhi office with a copy of his trip assessment. The director thumbed through it silently. In very direct terms, Kohli had spelled out why a Kanchenjunga mission was unsound: "Kanchenjunga is an extremely difficult mountain and even if there was no idea of putting any equipment on the summit, the chances of just climbing the mountain would be one in four. With the additional task of carrying four extra loads and installing them on the summit, the chances would become extremely remote. The entire plan, in my view, is almost impossible."

Though Kohli was not privy to all the technical details of the device, he understood that the CIA felt that it needed to be placed at an altitude of at least 27,500 feet. Though Kanchenjunga satisfied this parameter, this did not make the idea of climbing it any less ludicrous, given the added weight and two hours of required assembly.

Kohli raised another concern. The leaders of Sikkim were extremely sensitive to any climbs on Kanchenjunga due to its perceived sacred status. If it were publicly revealed that they had installed equipment on top, it would have major diplomatic ramifications.

"Can you offer any other options?" Kao asked.

Having anticipated the question, Kohli had three ready alternatives: Trisul, Nanda Kot, and Kamet. The most promising of these was Trisul, a

23,650-foot mountain that was among the easiest, in a relative sense, of the Himalayan peaks. It was so easy, in fact, that it had been climbed in moonlight. Although it was not as tall as the CIA wanted, he suggested that there might be some leeway on the minimum altitude for the device.

Kao remained emotionless. When he finally spoke, it was to offer sage advice. “How well do you know Mr. Mullik?”

Kohli confessed that he had met him on only a handful of occasions but had found him to be extremely rational. This impression was only partly accurate. Mullik could be a terror around subordinates, probably because of his penchant for perfectionism. But Kohli was only on deputation from the navy and was not too concerned about career advancement in the paramilitary forces. Besides, from a mountaineering perspective, his reasoning was sound, regardless of whether it conformed to any preconceived plans by laymen.

“If I were you, I would not give him such a blunt note,” insisted Kao. “I will explain the situation to him personally.” Making sure that Kohli had no other copies of his assessment, Kao meticulously ripped the report into shreds.

Kao’s tact apparently had the desired effect. Three days later, Kohli was called back to his office and informed that after further consultations with the CIA, Kanchenjunga had been discounted. However, his Trisul suggestion had also been rejected, because the American technicians thought that it was not tall enough and would be eclipsed by neighboring peaks. Nanda Kot was also discounted because it was too low, and Kamet was voted down because it was almost on the border and theoretically susceptible to a Chinese raid. As a compromise, the CIA now wanted them to climb Nanda Devi.

1. Interview with Arthur Davidson, 21 August 2000.

2. Davidson interview; Dan Wolfe interview; Bill interview.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nanda Devi

Although Nanda Devi had been presented as a compromise solution, Kohli was hardly breathing any easier. It was not an outright impossibility like Kanchenjunga, but Nanda Devi promised to be no bargain. Loosely translated as "Blessed Goddess," the peak is widely venerated in Hindu mythology, and it is not hard to understand why. Standing 25,645 feet, it forms a formidable natural buffer between the frigid winds whipping down from Tibet and the fertile Gangetic Plain. In that sense, it is nothing short of a savior to the farmers of the lowlands.

Adding to the mythology is Nanda Devi's mysterious isolation. It lies within a unique natural fortress in the central Himalayas. A seventy-mile barrier ring forms the circumference, around which stand a dozen major peaks. Entry to the center of the ring is limited to a single, steep gorge from the west. The narrow Rishi Ganga flows through this, draining 250 square miles of snow and ice from four glaciers inside the barrier; this river ultimately empties into the sacred Ganges.

For generations, expeditions attempted to navigate up the Rishi Ganga. This meant overcoming expansive stretches of downward-sloping rock slabs, followed by a narrow staircase of stones naturally cut across a huge wall. The latter is aptly dubbed the "Staircase to Heaven" by locals. If you are successful in traversing this feature, you can see the heavenly grandeur of the sacred Nanda Devi; one misstep, and you plummet thousands of feet into the gorge, reaching heaven via a more direct route.

Not until 1934 was a mountaineering party able to force a passage through the gorge. Inside the ring they found a pristine, elevated basin that came to be known as the Sanctuary. Covered with green meadows in summer and thick with snow in winter, the Sanctuary was devoid of human

habitation but rich in alpine fauna. Particularly prevalent was the Himalayan blue sheep, which ironically is neither blue (it is slate gray) nor a true sheep (it is an evolutionary blend of goat and sheep). These were preyed on by large populations of snow leopards and bears.

Nanda Devi from the south. The peak in the right distance is Nanda Devi East.

Rising majestically in the center of the basin is Nanda Devi. Its main peak is entirely within the Sanctuary, though it is connected by a serrated mile-long ridge to the smaller Nanda Devi East along the eastern wall. Numerous expeditions had climbed the mountains along the outside perimeter (Kohli had been on two—Nanda Kot and Nanda Devi East), but it was not until 1936 that a British-American team was able to enter the Sanctuary and take on the Blessed Goddess for the first time. The challenges they faced were legion. Nanda Devi's ice-sheathed summit is limited to a single approach from the south, entailing an extended hike up a knife-edge ridge. To the right of the ridge is a steep precipice, from which a fall would almost certainly be fatal. To the left is a direct route to the

glaciers below; a fall from here meant that the body would probably not be found.

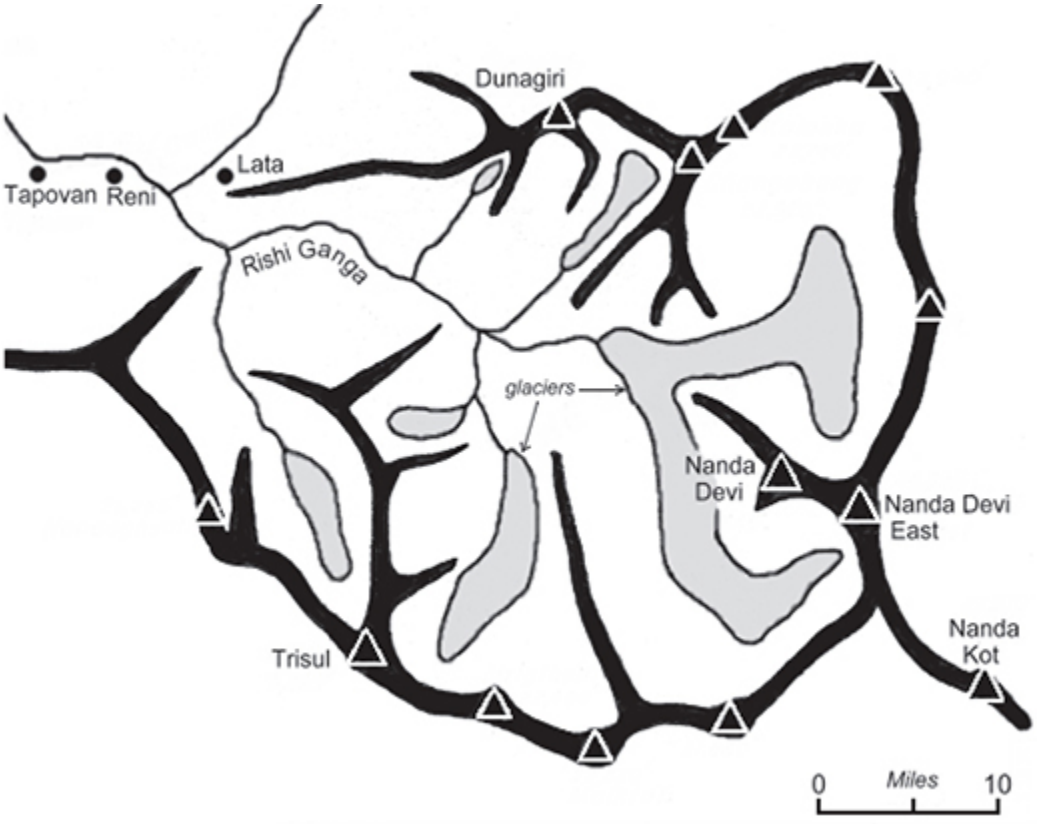
Nanda Devi (left) and Nanda Devi East photographed from Nanda Kot. (Courtesy Tsuyoshi Takeda)

There were other complicating factors about Nanda Devi. With ascents channeled along the narrow southern ridgeline, there was barely room for tents. For each of the five camps required on the way up, platforms had to be hacked out of the ice. The final stretch was a wall of loose schist set at an extremely steep angle—perhaps the worst combination for a fatigued climber.

Although the 1936 party reached the summit, one Sherpa lost his life. That same evening, a torrential downpour in the lower Garhwal caused massive destruction, further enhancing local myths about violating the abode of the goddess. Nanda Devi's second ascent was not until 1964, this time by an Indian team in the tryouts prior to their Everest success. There had been four other failed expeditions in the interim, one of which resulted in two Frenchmen vanishing without a trace. Even the indefatigable Sonam

Gyatso had been turned back by fierce blizzards during one attempt. All this did not make for comforting odds.

As if Nanda Devi was not a sufficient challenge in its own right, the Indian climbers had had little rest since the Everest expedition and McKinley interlude. Under normal conditions, a mountaineer needs at least six months of recuperation after a major climb. Given that winter was fast approaching, they had less than a month to finalize preparations.



The Sanctuary

Kohli's first order of business was to select a complement of highly experienced and strong Sherpas to support the team. Aside from the martial Gurkhas, the Sherpas are Nepal's most famous ethnic group. They form only a minuscule part of that country's population and live in a remote northeastern region of the kingdom. Despite their small numbers, they came to international prominence with the first Everest reconnaissance in 1921 and have remained a fixture of high-altitude mountaineering ever since.

By the early 1960s, employment opportunities for treks and climbs had lured Sherpas across the Himalayas. There was hardly a major peak in India or Nepal that did not have a resident Sherpa community waiting to be hired for the next expedition. Some of the best resided around Darjeeling, and that is where Kohli sought recruits for Nanda Devi.

Hiring Sherpas is something of an art. They do not carry proper résumés, relying instead on referrals and reputations gained from previous climbs. Kohli knew most of the top names, along with their achievements and idiosyncrasies. Two sprang to the top of his list, and Kohli was fortunate to find both willing and available. The first, Pasang Dawa Lama, had, among many other things, twice climbed Cho Oyo. His second ascent had been alongside Sonam, who rated him as one of the best climbers on the planet. It was no exaggeration: with his massive lungs, Pasang Dawa Lama could draw breath from even the thinnest atmosphere. Each time he conquered another peak, which was often, he would return to his home village in Nepal to a long victory procession—and a new bride.

The second Sherpa Kohli hired was Dawa Norbu. His exploits were equally laudable, though he did not boast a harem. Most important, he had been on the Indian team that had summitted Nanda Devi in 1964. That experience, Kohli figured, would be instrumental to their success.

Next, Kohli located and hired Thondup, a legendary Sherpa cook. Then pushing fifty years old and looking even older, Thondup had treated Kohli to his innovative culinary skills on numerous climbs: Annapurna III in 1961, Everest in 1962, and Everest again in 1965. Each time he went on a major expedition, he got a "promotion" in rank. For Nanda Devi, he would be General Thondup.

These three were placed directly on the rolls of the SSB, the paramilitary organization discreetly run by the Intelligence Bureau. This gave them not only regular paychecks but also official ranks within the Indian bureaucracy. Thondup was now a head constable, Dawa Norbu was a

more senior junior intelligence officer (equivalent to an army second lieutenant), and Pasang Dawa Lama was the highest ranking of the three as an assistant central intelligence officer II (akin to a first lieutenant).

Kohli also sought out six Sherpas who had been on the 1965 Everest team. All were among the most fit on that expedition, and all had distinguished themselves carrying loads to the last camp. To Kohli, their sense of duty and loyalty was beyond reproach. The best of them—Tashi—was elevated to a head constable in the SSB; the remainder were given lesser status as temporary employees of the ARC. Through referrals, Kohli hired a final eleven Sherpas, all of whom were paid through the ARC budget. This brought his total to nineteen climbing Sherpas plus General Thondup.

Returning to New Delhi, Kohli gave a status report to ARC and inquired whether an aerial reconnaissance of the target might be possible. He was told that an overflight would be conducted as a matter of top priority—a decision that nearly caused the expedition to begin with a calamity.

ARC had changed considerably since its official start in September 1963. Conceived as a covert airlift wing to infiltrate General Uban's commandos into Tibet in the event of renewed hostilities with China, ARC began with an aging fleet of C-46 transports provided courtesy of the CIA. But as the frontier cease-fire held, ARC's original raison d'être started to waft away.

Showing flexibility, the CIA and Intelligence Bureau assigned new missions to the unit. In 1964, one of its C-46 airframes was packed with hardware for use as an electronic intelligence (ELINT) gathering platform. Flying long sorties along the Tibetan border, this ELINT bird collected Chinese radar signals for subsequent translation and analysis. ARC also flew supply missions for isolated paramilitary outposts along India's northern border. Some of these flights were conducted by the U-10 Helio

Courier, a single-engine light plane known for its short takeoff and landing (STOL) ability. The CIA had used the Helio to good effect in support of the guerrillas it was sponsoring in the highlands of Laos. Without exaggeration, it could land at unimproved runways the length of a football field.

The CIA also supplied ARC with a unique twin-engined variant of the Helio, appropriately called the Twin Helio. It had first been flown in 1960, and only five had ever been built. One had been supplied to a CIA proprietary in Nepal, and two had gone into the ARC inventory. Though the agency's own pilots never liked it much, the Indians gave the Twin Helio high marks. "It was more stable on landings than the regular Helio," said one ARC pilot, "and it had the added security of a second engine."[1]

By early 1965, ARC added its first rotary-wing aircraft. But instead of coming from the CIA, the Mi-4 choppers were offered by the Soviet Union. When it learned that Moscow was trying to impinge on its territory, the CIA was initially miffed. But because Indo-U.S. relations had hit something of a rut at the time, and the United States was not budgeting any further hardware donations of its own, Washington had little choice but to mute its protests when the Soviet offer was accepted.

The Nanda Devi operation was set to make heavy use of most of the ARC fleet. Because of the difficulty in reaching the Sanctuary via the Rishi Ganga gorge, aerial options were the only efficient means of supplying the expedition with food. ARC officers calculated that most of the provisions could be free-dropped or landed by the Mi-4 choppers. The Twin Helio, meanwhile, would provide a shuttle between New Delhi and a staging base close to the Sanctuary.

The Twin Helio was also selected to provide Kohli's requested aerial reconnaissance of Nanda Devi. Flying the aircraft would be Jim Rhyne. A top-rated STOL pilot, Rhyne had gained a stellar reputation while flying single-engine Helios over the mountains of Laos for the CIA's proprietary, Air America. In late 1963, he had come to India to provide transition

training for the first batch of Helio pilot candidates in ARC and had returned periodically to offer instruction on the Twin Helio.

Rhyne departed on his reconnaissance from New Delhi's Palam airport, then headed northeast for a little more than 200 miles. There were clear skies for most of the trip, making for a singularly uneventful flight. But just short of his target, a massive cloud bank loomed. Used to the mix of mountains and inclement weather while flying the skies of Laos, Rhyne plunged into the cumulous wall without hesitation. But the deities, it seemed, were determined to shield their goddess from prying eyes. No sooner had he entered the cloud than a single bolt of lightning slapped the plane. Recalled Rhyne: "The radio went out. The frame was magnetized so the compass locked at 120 degrees, rendering it useless. The controls were still responding, so I reversed direction to head out of the soup and make a dead reckoning back toward New Delhi."[2]

Rhyne's instincts proved correct. Working his way out of the clouds, he came in low to the ground to get his bearings. Eventually recognizing some landmarks, he steered toward Palam and made a bouncy landing. A quick inspection of the outside showed just how lucky he had been. Various rivets had been knocked out, an antenna was dangling on the ground, there were scorch marks on the tail, and one of the tires was discolored. Most shocking of all was the condition of one of the landing struts, which looked like it had been riddled with welding spatter. After reviewing the damage, ARC quietly agreed that a reconnaissance flight was not a good idea after all.

The other Indian members of the expedition were equally busy with preparations. On 28 August, Kohli had beckoned Bhangu, their expert radioman, to New Delhi and charged him with procuring food for the mission. Bhangu had performed this task for the Everest climb and had proved to be an outstanding logistician. Dusting off his Everest food files, he had a coherent food plan ready within six hours. But unfortunately,

planning food requirements was one thing; actually procuring the food was quite different. Due to bureaucratic red tape and import restrictions, many food items in India were rationed or otherwise difficult to obtain. For more than a week, Bhangu trolled the capital, seeking adequate stocks of nonperishable foodstuffs. Particularly difficult to locate was good-quality canned fruit juice. Perishable items, such as eggs, vegetables, and meat, would have to wait until the final moments before departure.

While this was transpiring, Kohli dispatched an initial group of nine Sherpas to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary via the Rishi Ganga gorge. Joining the Sherpas were eleventh-hour additions Gautam and Sinha, a pair of junior intelligence officers who had passed through Sonam's Mountaineering Institute. Although both had graduated from the school's basic and advanced courses, neither had tackled any peaks of note. And they would be taking on the same horrendous challenges—the rock slabs, the Stairway to Heaven—faced by the handful of expeditions attempting to penetrate the Sanctuary since 1934.

The mandate of this initial party was twofold. First, they were to locate and mark a suitable helipad within the Sanctuary for subsequent ARC shuttles. Second, they were to recruit a group of local porters near the Sanctuary that could help carry the supplies from the helipad to the base of Nanda Devi.

Hiring porters was more difficult than it sounded. Nanda Devi is perhaps the only major peak in the world whose approach march does not pass through any local habitation. The closest settlement of note is Joshimath, which lies west of the Sanctuary's gorge entry. Joshimath is a sprawling town, but it is known for little more than being the home of a great Hindu sage who attained enlightenment in a nearby cave. Given the harsh reputation of the Rishi Ganga gorge and the fact that proper cold-weather clothing was practically nonexistent among Joshimath's residents,

it was a good bet that none would willingly trek to the Sanctuary for any amount of money.

This was the situation faced by Gautam, Sinha, and the Sherpas when they arrived at Joshimath on 1 September. Realizing that they would have to be less than forthcoming, the two officers claimed that they sought porters merely to haul supplies sixteen miles east to Lata, a tiny village at the Rishi Ganga entrance, not across the Sanctuary itself. For this, thirty-three fit males—none of them wearing warm clothes or shoes—stepped forward to volunteer. They divided up the supplies, lashed them to rattan baskets on their backs, and departed on 3 September for the hike east.

For Kohli and several other members of the Everest expedition, Nanda Devi momentarily took second stage when they got an invitation on 6 September to call on President S. Radhakrishnan. A noted philosopher, Radhakrishnan had been on a diplomatic mission immediately after the Everest mission in June; it was only now, upon the team's return from McKinley, that their schedules coincided.

That evening, Bhangu, Kohli, Rawat, and Wangyal had their audience with the president. They presented him with a letter they had been given by an incarnate lama at a Buddhist monastery along the approach to Everest. Radhakrishnan graciously accepted the letter and showered the climbers with affection. But just before parting, the president lost the glint in his eyes. "Commander Kohli," he said with a deadpan, "before you entered my office, Defense Minister [Y. B.] Chavan came to see me and sought my blessing for the capture of Lahore."

His words left the climbers speechless. Since August, India and Pakistan had once again been wrestling over control of the contested Kashmir region. Pakistan had drawn first blood that month when it attempted to infiltrate a large number of Kashmiri guerrilla militants into Indian-controlled territory. The Pakistani generals thought that this would spark a general uprising among the locals. When this did not happen, they

crossed the border on 1 September with armor and artillery. India, not surprisingly, reacted in kind. Though the conflict had been relatively contained along one section of the border, it had the potential to explode into a general war between the two neighbors. And based on Radhakrishnan's admission, it now appeared that all-out war was only hours away. The president claimed that Indian tanks would enter the Pakistani city of Lahore the following morning.

Heading home after the meeting, Kohli drove in a daze. The president was quite outspoken by nature, and Kohli hoped that Radhakrishnan might have been injecting a bit of hyperbole into what he said. If it were true, however, Kohli was pretty sure that the Nanda Devi expedition would be postponed until after the war, which meant that they would probably miss that year's climbing season. Prepared for the worst, he drifted off into a restless sleep.

At daybreak, Kohli rushed down to the corner to buy the morning newspaper. His eyes scanned the headlines for word of the fighting at Lahore. Though the Kashmir conflict was top news, there was no mention of any major cross-border operation by Indian tanks. He made a few quick calls to knowledgeable friends just to make sure, but all assured him that there had been no attack. Puzzled but highly relieved, he pushed ahead with preparations for the expedition.

Later that morning, Kohli dispatched the second increment of climbers toward Nanda Devi. This party consisted of Bhangu, Sisodia, and seven Sherpas spread among four vehicles packed tight with supplies. Their intention was to drive 100 miles northeast to the town of Roorkee, then another 35 miles east to Rishikesh. From Rishikesh, they would shift to an isolated airstrip along the Alaknanda, a sizable river that links the Rishi Ganga with the sacred Ganges. Known as Gauchar, this airstrip had been abandoned after World War II and was being reactivated as the staging base for their mission.

This second party departed New Delhi on 8 September and initially made good time. Driving past midnight, they had nearly reached Roorkee when a roadblock loomed across their path. Bhangu got out to investigate and found a crowd of fifty jittery students from a local agricultural college. A southbound truck driver, who had earlier passed through Roorkee, breathlessly reported that Pakistani paratroopers had landed at that town and were engaged in a bloody firefight with Indian soldiers. The students, understandably in a panic, were looking to defend their turf.

The tension proved contagious. Hearing of the marauding paratroopers, the Sherpas grew edgy. The party's truck drivers got out of their vehicles and refused to proceed. "Sir, you will get a pension if you are shot dead," complained one in flowery terms, "but I am a lowly driver who will be thrown into the mouth of a bullet."

Bhangu and Sisodia were now in a quandary. Their orders were to get to Rishikesh without delay to rendezvous the next morning with Wangyal, who was coming from New Delhi by train. They also wanted to avoid inquiries from curious local authorities, who often manned roadblocks during daylight hours. But based on reports they heard on the radio, they knew that paratroopers had indeed landed inside India. Three groups of Pakistani commandos had been dropped near the border during the predawn hours of 7 September; by that same afternoon, all three contingents had been discovered by Indian troops and were being rounded up before they could inflict any damage.

Although the airborne threat had been quickly contained, paratrooper sightings were still being reported at a range of other locations, including New Delhi. Straining to hear any telltale sounds of battle, Bhangu could discern nothing from the direction of Roorkee. A half hour later, he again strained to pick out the staccato beat of distant automatic weapons fire. Again, there was nothing. Convinced that the rumor of nearby paratroopers was baseless, Bhangu approached one of the drivers and asked him to

proceed, but the driver refused outright. Noting that he was a fellow Sikh, Bhangu appealed to his ethnicity and told him that a refusal would give a bad name to the Punjab. Still, he had no luck. Trying a different tack, he said that a refusal would be a slight against those fighting on the front line. Eventually, the appeals had their desired effect. Cajoled back into their trucks, the drivers cautiously edged through a quiet Roorkee. Bhangu, Sisodia, and the Sherpas remained alert throughout, just in case.

At 0500 on 9 September, they arrived at Rishikesh. Exhausted after a sleepless night, the Sherpas checked into a local guest house for a quick rest. Bhangu and Sisodia, meanwhile, went to the railway station to await Wangyal. Once he arrived, they set about transferring their supplies to a new set of vehicles with local drivers, and they drove that afternoon to the small town of Srinagar. After some much-needed sleep, they were back in their trucks the next morning and making the short trip from Srinagar to Gauchar.

As the designated site for their staging base, a more idyllic location could not be imagined. Situated on the bank of the Alaknanda, Gauchar was framed by scenic forests and distant, picturesque hills. The weather, with a brisk but brief morning chill, was perfect. The team unloaded and sorted supplies and pitched tents. Bhangu ventured into nearby villages on 11 September to buy goats and other perishables he could not prepack in New Delhi.

By 12 September, Gauchar was ready for chopper operations. It was assumed that the first party—Gautam, Sinha, nine Sherpas, and the thirty-three porters—had already completed their trek into the chilly Sanctuary and were patiently awaiting their arrival. To confirm as much, General Thondup was going to fly aboard an Mi-4 for an initial reconnaissance.

Early that morning, the first chopper landed at Gauchar with a complement of three ARC pilots and three mechanics. Flight Lieutenant Mohan Lalwani, one of two ARC pilots qualified in the Soviet-made

chopper, was at the controls. They loaded 700 pounds of supplies on board and headed east. Forty-five minutes later, they were above the Sanctuary. They spotted the first party, came in low, and surveyed the white terrain. Lalwani allowed just enough time for Thondup to free-drop shovels and several food bundles from the side door, then he throttled up the engine and returned to Gauchar.

A second sortie into the Sanctuary was set for the following morning, but this time, they would attempt a landing. General Thondup would again go on the Mi-4, along with Wangyal and more than 200 pounds of supplies. As planned, they came in low and found that the first party had used the shovels to clear a rudimentary helipad. Landing without incident, they performed a quick head count and confirmed that all members had arrived without injury. On a less positive note, they discovered that several of the food bundles dropped the previous day had smashed on impact. An entire load of ghee (clarified butter used in Indian cooking) had been lost as a result. After making these brief observations, Thondup and Wangyal piled back into the Mi-4 and were back at Gauchar by midmorning.

Two days later, following a brief delay to stockpile oil and aviation fuel at Gauchar, Wangyal and Bhangu were aboard the third flight to the Sanctuary. This time, they stayed behind as the Mi-4 went back to fetch four Sherpas from the bank of the Alaknanda. Quickly, they set about turning the Sanctuary landing zone into a proper camp. Tents were pitched, and Thondup had a functioning kitchen by early afternoon. At the same time, Bhangu set up his radio set to establish a wireless link with Gauchar.

Not all the news was good. The porters from Joshimath, under the false impression that they were going only as far as Lata village, had not brought enough food rations and were severely malnourished. They voraciously consumed the supplies Bhangu took from the bundles earmarked for the climbers. At an average elevation of 13,300 feet, the basin was extremely cold, and the poorly dressed porters were forced to

huddle together for warmth. Two had defected that morning and left for home; most of the others were threatening to join them. Sensing the discontent among the hired hands, Bhangu radioed Gauchar that afternoon about the pressing need to address the porter situation. No reply was forthcoming.

The next day, 16 September, three more chopper sorties brought the remaining supplies to the Sanctuary helipad. Better fed but still without warm clothes, the porters were less than pleased when asked to collect firewood and carry it toward the base of Nanda Devi. Only after a round of persuasive lobbying by Bhangu did they reluctantly hike to the newly established Base Camp at 16,000 feet. Bhangu soon joined them, bringing the radio set previously at the helipad.

By the morning of 17 September, Bhangu's lobbying had worn thin. Facing a virtual mutiny among the porters, he begged them to wait until Kohli arrived in a few days. In the interim, Bhangu said that he would do his best to get more food and perhaps some good clothing. But it was to no avail. Hired under false pretenses, the porters cried foul. Just eighteen were still present by nightfall. Of these, two were helping in Thondup's kitchen, and two were cranking the generator for Bhangu's radio set, leaving only fourteen to haul loads between the helipad and Base Camp. By necessity, some of the Sherpas were forced to assist, sapping them of energy desperately needed for the climb ahead.

The next morning, two more members arrived in the Sanctuary by helicopter. One was a last-minute addition to the expedition named Sonam Wangyal, the exact same name as one of the original team members. To make matters more confusing, both Wangyals came from the border area in Ladakh, and both were in the employ of the Intelligence Bureau. There the similarities stopped. Whereas the first Wangyal was youthful, incredibly strong, and a world-class mountaineer, the new Wangyal was older and had earned no major climbing accolades. The new Wangyal was also a bit

melancholy over an affair of the heart. The previous month, he had gone home to Ladakh to marry his sweetheart, but the wedding had been postponed due to the worsening conflict with Pakistan. To avoid confusion, the original team member would be known as Wangyal, and the newcomer was nicknamed Wangyal II.

The second new arrival was the team's amicable Sikkimese compatriot Sonam Gyatso, who, in Kohli's absence, was the most senior member on the ground. Unfortunately, Sonam and Bhangu got off to a poor start. Pulling rank, Sonam dictated that the radio set be shifted from Base Camp back to the helipad in order to get "better reception." Bhangu, who was in charge of communications, bristled at the order because of its technical demerits, but he was overruled.

The following day, Sonam departed for Base Camp with two Sherpas. Less than an hour later, he slipped on a rock face and seriously lacerated his hand. Bleeding profusely, he struggled back to the helipad to await a flight to Gauchar. In pain and somewhat embarrassed about his fall, he berated Bhangu over the food situation in front of the porters and the Sherpas.

Bhangu took the criticism in silence. When he had first learned that he would be climbing Nanda Devi, he had had high hopes that the expedition would have even greater harmony than the Everest mission. Prospects were especially good, he felt, because the climbers all hailed either directly or indirectly from the Intelligence Bureau. Reality, however, was proving otherwise. Back at Gauchar, he was distressed to discover that the ARC communications officer manning the radio set had gotten only twenty minutes of instruction before arrival. Then there was the food and clothing situation with the porters. In addition, no cold-weather kits had yet been allocated for Sinha, Gautam, or Wangyal II; in the interim, he had lent a set of clothes to Wangyal II until proper supplies were received from New Delhi. Compounding matters was Sonam's criticism.

By the morning of 20 September, morale at the camp was low. Things were about to change, however. In the distance, the sound of chopper blades reverberated across the Sanctuary. As the Mi-4's wheels touched rock, the side door opened. Out stepped three Americans and Kohli. For the first time in days, the team members, Sherpas, and even porters permitted themselves the luxury of a smile and moved with a sense of purpose. They had a mountain to climb.

2. Interview with James Rhyne, 29 April 1998.

1. Interview with S. K. Bajaj, 16 June 2000.

CHAPTER FIVE

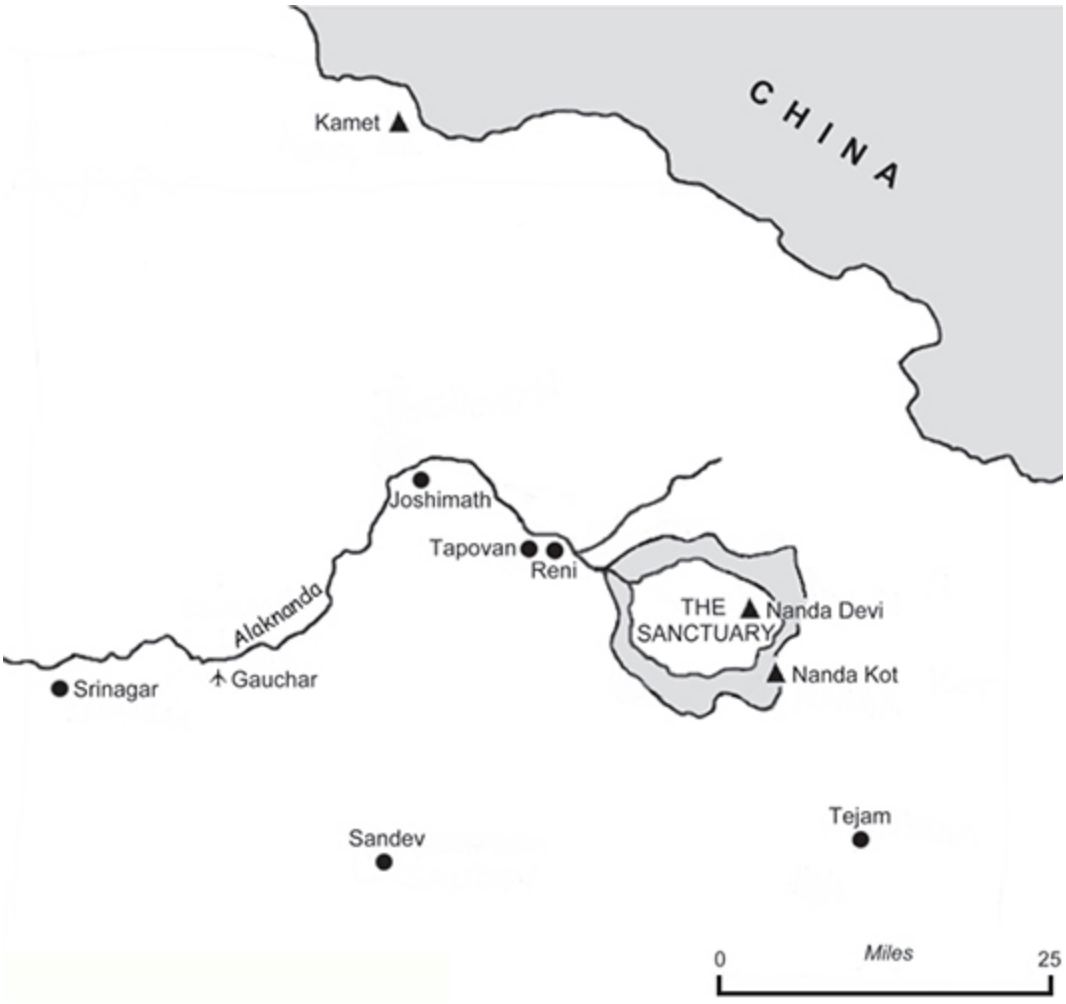
Members and Friends

Much had happened in the days prior to Kohli's departure for the Sanctuary. For a time, the Everest climb again took center stage. On the evening of 8 September, Kohli—accompanied by Sonam and Rawat—was invited to address both houses of Parliament. It was a rare privilege. The leaders of all political parties put aside their differences and made generous remarks about the climbers' feat. To a man, they felt both honored and humbled to address this distinguished home crowd.

Rawat departed New Delhi on 14 September, but by the time he reached Gauchar the following day, he was feverish and in need of medical attention. He was forced to go to a clinic in the nearby town of Srinagar. Most of the other climbers on the Indian team had reached the Sanctuary by the end of the second week of September, and Kohli passed word for the Americans to join them. It had been decided that a trimmed-down contingent of just four U.S. climbers was necessary. Lute Jerstad, Tom Frost, Sandy Bill, and a recovered Rob Schaller made the cut. Barry Bishop, whose recruiting assistance had been instrumental, would not be coming; Dan Wolfe and Gil Blinn were also deemed redundant.

Besides the four climbers, the CIA also sent Bill McKniff as the case officer in charge of the U.S. side of the project. Despite being a China expert with little background in the subcontinent, McKniff would get on extremely well with his Indian colleagues. Arriving with him was Gordon Sleeper, the CIA technician who had been in Anchorage. Sleeper would not actually be going to Nanda Devi but would instead establish a relay station —ambiguously known as the Field Research Unit—atop a ridge near Sandev, a small town about thirty-one miles south of the Sanctuary. He would be joined at Sandev by four Indian technicians trained in the United

States. Sleeper's outpost would receive the signals from the mountaintop sensor, then retransmit the most sensitive data to New Delhi and Washington. The climbers were told that officials in the Indian and U.S. capitals could have readouts from atop Nanda Devi within three minutes.



Uttar Pradesh province

One additional American arrived with the rest. Introduced only as "Jim," he was from the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. Soft-spoken and polite, Jim would oversee the fueling of the generator at the last moment before they scaled Nanda Devi.

Since this was a joint covert operation, the CIA and ARC worked as equal partners. The U.S. team members and their sensitive sensor equipment arrived aboard a so-called embassy support flight to Palam. Met

on the tarmac by intelligence officers from both organizations, the climbers were whisked away without having to go through the normal customs formalities. The secret cargo, too, was discreetly rushed through a side gate.

On 18 September, Kohli met up with his U.S. colleagues and took them to meet his wife, Pushpa. It was a heartfelt reunion, and from that point on, they were all on a first-name basis. For security reasons, the Indians were to cryptically refer to the Americans as "friends." The Indian climbers were known as "members."

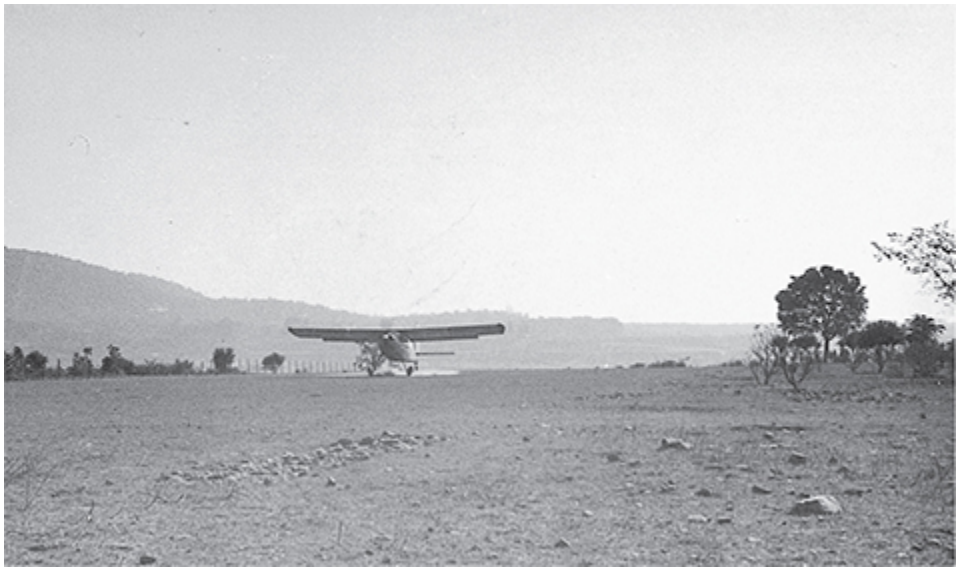
Kohli was not particularly worried about shielding his upcoming activities from Pushpa, who knew enough to keep classified matters to herself. However, he needed to handle his domestic situation very gingerly. Already that year he had been away from home for four months on Everest and another month in the United States, and now a third expedition loomed. Pushpa did not openly complain, but Kohli could tell that she was less than thrilled about his prolonged absences.

An irate spouse, it turned out, was just part of his worries. Perhaps due to the abrupt change in climate, Sandy Bill and Rob Schaller came down with fevers and headaches. Both sought medical attention and could not, at least for the time being, proceed toward the Sanctuary. The joint expedition was getting smaller by the day.

With an eye on the calendar, Kohli loaded Lute, Tom, and Jim in a car and departed New Delhi on 19 September. Though the conflict with Pakistan was still raging along the border, the rumors of marauding Pakistani paratroopers had subsided, and the trip north was without incident. They continued driving through the afternoon, stopping once to enjoy a glass of beer—except for Tom, who was a devout Mormon and shunned alcohol. Later they passed through Dehra Dun. One of the most important towns in the Himalayan foothills, it had been an educational center and military cantonment during British colonial rule. After independence, it retained some of the country's most prestigious schools, as

well as several army garrisons and the Indian Military Academy. With little time to enjoy Dehra Dun's pastoral beauty, they turned west, reaching the town of Kalsi in the early afternoon.

Located halfway between Dehra Dun and the headquarters of Uban's Tibetan commando force at Chakrata, Kalsi was the site of a small ARC air base. CIA pilot Jim Rhyne had actually tried to land a Helio at the Chakrata polo field but had severely damaged the airframe on the first attempt. Since then, Helio and Twin Helio shuttle flights made extensive use of Kalsi's STOL runway. Because it had more complete supply and maintenance features than Gauchar, the Soviet helicopters allocated for their mission were also regularly rotated back through Kalsi.



An ARC Helio Courier lands at the Kalsi airstrip during support operations for the Nanda Devi operation. (Courtesy M. K. Anand)

After a two-hour stay, they departed Kalsi in one of the choppers. Dr. Tripathi and Sisodia were both at the Gauchar helipad to offer greetings as they stepped off the aircraft. Given a guided tour, the new arrivals were pleasantly surprised with what he saw. Though in operation for only ten days, Gauchar was shaping up into a small but proper base. Sisodia, however, was perhaps disappointed that it did not have a PX like at Elmendorf.

The following morning, the three American "friends" and Kohli took an Mi-4 shuttle to the Sanctuary. Bhangu, apparently because of his tense standoff with Sonam, looked particularly pleased to see them. For his part, Sonam was anxious to fly back to Gauchar so that he could visit the medical clinic at Srinagar and get his lacerated hand properly dressed. Unfortunately for him, Dr. Tripathi arrived in the next shuttle and insisted on stitching the wound himself. Showing no hard feelings, Bhangu spent the next hour conversing with Sonam to divert his attention while his hand was cleaned and sewn.

Showing his normal enthusiasm and resilience, a bandaged Sonam immediately volunteered to join Lute, Sisodia, and Kohli on a short acclimatization climb. Taking it easy on this initial outing, they hiked for about 1,000 feet before coming back to the helipad. Once there, they broke open some bottles of beer to celebrate their reunion within the Sanctuary. Tom Frost—or Tom Juice, as Kohli had dubbed him—downed a glass of citrus juice instead.

Two more shuttles had arrived in the meantime, each bearing gear for the American climbers and additional supplies Kohli had procured over the previous week. These items included flashlights, ice axes, and extra jackets, as well as air mattresses and pullovers. There were also some thin foil blankets specially developed for U.S. space flights; Barry Bishop had obtained these through government channels, and it was the first time they would be used on a mountaineering expedition. There were smiles all around that night as Lute and Kohli divided these items among friends, members, and Sherpas.

As the sun dawned over the Sanctuary on 21 September, the time had come to begin shifting the focus of activity from the helipad to Base Camp. Thus far, Base Camp was still just a small clearing with a pile of supplies that had been dumped there over the previous week. Expanding on this, Bhangu, Wangyal, Wangyal II, Gautam, and several Sherpas each took a

load that morning and filed away from the Sanctuary helipad. Climbing through noon, they belatedly realized that they had mistakenly followed a gully heading away from Nanda Devi's south face. They were forced to retrace their steps and did not reach Base Camp until 1510 hours. Though winded, the Sherpas talked about making a preliminary foray up the side of the Blessed Goddess. But since the hour was late, they instead traced their steps back to the Sanctuary helipad and arrived after nightfall. To their delight, the Americans had arranged for the delivery of some good rations, which General Thondup turned into a veritable feast. Stuffed, they all slept well.

To that point, Kohli could not help but feel that their mission was progressing quite satisfactorily. Although the joint team had been attrited by several members, those that remained were healthy and motivated. The remaining low-altitude porters recruited in Joshimath had been plied with solid meals, somewhat reducing their complaints. And best of all, the weather was holding out. But as good as this sounded, Kohli knew that morale and energy levels were fickle commodities that needed constant attention and monitoring. As several of his men had exerted considerable energy during the previous day's hike, he decided to let the Sherpas rest on 22 September. Bhangu spent a few hours that afternoon sorting through the food rations, while Lute and Kohli finalized the routes and ferry schedules for shuttling supplies between the various camps.

Lute proved to be an extremely sound planner. Although Bill McKniff was in charge of the American side of the operation from his post back at Gauchar, there was no question that Lute had emerged as their undisputed on-site coordinator. Both he and Kohli concurred that they would lay siege to Nanda Devi much like any other expedition to a major peak. This involved teams of climbers and Sherpas leapfrogging up the side of the mountain, progressively establishing a series of four camps above Base Camp. They would shuttle supplies from camp to camp until the requisite

material was fully stocked at the highest site. Once this was done and the men were properly acclimated, the sensor would be fueled and passed upward from Base Camp. In a final surge of effort, it would be carried to a fifth camp, then placed at the summit and activated.

Before retiring that evening, Kohli called for a meeting of all climbers to discuss their tentative schedule. The next morning, he announced, Bhangu, Wangyal, Wangyal II, Gautam, and seven Sherpas were to venture back to Base Camp. They would remain there overnight and then proceed upward to establish the first of the five camps along the slope—appropriately called Camp One—on 24 September.

As planned, the four members and seven Sherpas departed the helipad at dawn on 23 September. Each of the Sherpas was carrying at least forty-five pounds of supplies—a considerable amount, but still well short of their maximum capability at that relatively low altitude. As part of the acclimatization process, Kohli, Dr. Tripathi, Sisodia, and Lute joined them for a short way. Though none of them suffered from the effects of altitude sickness, they did endure a slight setback when Sisodia's feet were mangled by the stiff leather of his new boots. As a result, he seemed to be out of serious climbing contention until his feet healed, temporarily robbing the expedition of yet another mountaineer.

Back at the helipad, Tom Frost spent the day taking Jim on a more modest acclimatization run. This was very important, because Jim alone knew the intricacies of nuclear power and had the vital role of correctly placing the fuel rods in the generator before they departed up the slope. Jim was not a mountaineer, and he was an elderly man to boot, so there was concern that he might fall ill from the altitude and need medical evacuation. And if they lost their nuclear expert, they might fall hopelessly behind schedule.

Back at Base Camp, those who were going to stay overnight spent the final hours of light pitching tents and building a small kitchen hut. It had

been a long day, and the Sherpas did not finish dinner preparations until 2100 hours. After eating quickly, they wasted no time piling into their tents to grab some rest. The next day, their siege would begin.

Of all the members of the expedition, Bhangu always seemed to wake first. By 0630 hours on 24 September, he was dressed and pacing outside his Base Camp tent. Thirsty for tea, he scrounged up a kettle and filled it with water. When he turned to the campfire, however, he found that the wood embers had grown cold. As the fatigued Sherpas had yet to stir, Bhangu tried his best Boy Scout impersonation and began rubbing some sticks together to get a spark. It proved to be futile. With the thin air, he could barely generate smoke, much less a flame. Fortunately for him, his cursing woke Tashi. A veteran of the Everest climb, Tashi was an extremely loyal, likable sort. “Sir, what do you do?” he admonished Bhangu. “You should have called for me.” In less than a minute, he had flames licking under the kettle.

By 0900, the eleven members and Sherpas were loaded with gear and ready to move to Camp One at the 19,000-foot level. Each of them carried no less than twenty-five pounds apiece on this first day. Marching upward under a bright sun, they kept the pace slow but steady as they followed the peak’s narrow southern ridge. Though it was not particularly steep—which meant that they did not have to pair off and tie 150-foot lengths of safety rope to each other—the hike promised to be exhausting. In addition, they would probably need to cut through ice to make a platform for their tents.

As of noon, the eleven had made considerable progress. To their pleasant surprise, there was almost no snow or ice blocking their path. Instead, the route was littered with loose rock outcroppings, which easily splintered under their weight and sent showers of sharp gravel onto the climbers below. Not until 1420 hours did they reach a point that their altimeter showed to be 19,000 feet. Selecting a narrow shelf, they dumped

their loads and reversed course. By 1715 hours, they were back at Base Camp and awaiting dinner.

While they had been blazing a trail to Camp One, Kohli had spent the day organizing a porter shuttle between Base Camp and the Sanctuary helipad. The porters were working hard and with relatively few complaints, clothing deficiencies aside. Kohli had asked ARC to send some extra clothes, but it seemed like New Delhi was having a hard time fulfilling this seemingly simple request. The next day, however, the pestering paid off. An Mi-4 arrived from Gauchar bearing a bundle of woolen shirts and trousers. A more grateful group of porters could hardly be imagined.

That's not all the aircraft carried. Bill McKniff, Sandy Bill, and Rawat also stepped off the Mi-4, the latter two having fully recovered from their earlier illnesses. Aside from Rob Schaller, who was still at a hospital in Roorkee with suspected malaria, all the climbers were now on site and itching to tackle Nanda Devi. Even Sisodia, whose feet had been ravaged by new boots, was not as badly injured as initially feared. Making a speedy recovery, he had already hiked back to Base Camp.

Pleased with their momentum, Lute and Kohli had scheduled a full day of events for 26 September. As part of the acclimatization process, Sandy, Jim, and Tom went up to Base Camp for the day and let the thin air tax their lungs before returning to the Sanctuary helipad. Lute, Sonam, and Kohli also ventured up to Base Camp late in the afternoon. They had a good incentive to stay overnight: General Thondup was now working his culinary wonders from that forward site.

During the same day, there had been a flurry of activity up the mountain. Gautam and several Sherpas had manpacked supplies up to Camp One and returned. Wangyal, Wangyal II, and three Sherpas had also made the climb up to Camp One. Carrying no loads to conserve their energy, these last five had immediately pushed upward to establish Camp Two at close to the 20,200-foot mark.

Unlike the relatively uneventful route up to Camp One, the next leg to Camp Two was a serious challenge. Following the steepest and most narrow portion of the ridge, the climbers were faced with a sharp drop to their right the entire way. To the left, the view extended down to the glacier at the base of the mountain. About the only good news was that, like the first segment of the climb, the route to Camp Two was surprisingly devoid of snow. Reduced to a crawl as they negotiated the fractured rock surface, the five climbers hammered in a series of rope safety lines up the ridge. Rather than being connected to each other, they could protect themselves by clipping a short safety tether to the fixed ropes. Aching from the laborious effort, they stopped when their altimeter registered 20,200 feet, then carefully descended back to Camp One. Even Wangyal, who possessed more high-altitude strength than virtually anyone else on the expedition, could barely catch his breath when he entered his tent and radioed a status report to Base Camp over his walkie-talkie.

The climbers had done extremely well that day. Taking advantage of the extraordinarily calm weather thus far, they had kept up a frantic pace. An immediate concern, however, was the continued health of Wangyal and Wangyal II, both of whom had endured a particularly strenuous day. To give them some well-deserved rest, Kohli asked Bhangu and Gautam to go up to Camp One the next morning and replace the two. A new set of Sherpas would go with them as well.

Though satisfied in one sense, Kohli went to sleep that night with uneasy feelings coursing through his mind. Their luck, he feared, was set to end.

Bhangu and Gautam, each carrying a backpack brimming with food, left Base Camp at 0915 hours as scheduled. A little more than four hours later, they arrived at the single orange tent that constituted Camp One. Wangyal, Wangyal II, and their Sherpas wasted no time bidding the

newcomers farewell and setting off down the slope for the relatively luxurious quarters at the base.

Less than half an hour later, the Blessed Goddess began to vent her fury. Clouds closed in overhead, ushering in a sharp wind that whipped down the ridge. All five men at Camp One were forced to retreat into a tent meant for two. But they were the lucky ones. Lute, who had departed Base Camp later that morning to join them, was blasted by wind and scrambled down the mountain after coming within 500 feet of his goal. Sisodia, who was also intent on reaching Camp One, joined Lute in scurrying back to the base.

Following their plight over the radio, Kohli had little choice but to cancel tentative plans for the three new Sherpas to move up to Camp Two. Cramped and with little appetite, they instead spent the rest of the day squeezed alongside Bhangu and Gautam, listening to the wind slap their tent.

Just as quickly as it started, the foul weather abated by morning. Rushing to get back on schedule, the two members and three Sherpas at Camp One woke early and suited up for the climb to Camp Two. They clipped into the safety line fixed by Wangyal's party two days earlier as they carried the first batch of supplies to properly establish the next site. This included a trio of two-man tents, a pressure cooker, pitons, shovels, a butane gas burner, and a 600-foot coil of rope.

For the next two and a half hours, the five made their way upward. "It was not a particularly difficult climb," assessed Bhangu, "just a lot of rock." At 1150 hours, they reached the end of the fixed rope and looked for a suitable perch for Camp Two. They found a slight cove, cleared rocks away for two of the tents, and pitched them. Resting after this exertion, Bhangu took out his walkie-talkie and raised Sonam at Base Camp. The two members and one Sherpa were to return immediately to the base for rest,

instructed Sonam, and the other two Sherpas were to stay at Camp One. So they left the supplies and headed down the slope in midafternoon.

At Base Camp, mixed news was flowing in from other fronts. On a positive note, most of the climbers still at the Sanctuary helipad had moved up to Base Camp. An exception was Tom Frost, who had stayed behind to tend to CIA case officer Bill McKniff. Suffering from a fever, headache, and lack of appetite, Bill was showing the effects of mild altitude sickness. They also got the bad news that Rob Schaller had grown too weak to participate in the expedition; he had been driven back to New Delhi to catch a flight for the United States. This was the second time bad luck had kept him from the slopes, having been scrubbed from the Alaska climb because of a leg injury.

On a lighter note, Kohli was still contending with a group of low-altitude porters who were sometimes less than willing to make supply shuttles between the Sanctuary helipad and Base Camp. To circumvent their lack of enthusiasm, he had the enlightened idea of bypassing the helipad altogether by having the choppers bring their loads directly to Base Camp. Because of the rocky terrain and steep pitch of the slope, landing an Mi-4 was not feasible, but Kohli thought that a free-drop of supplies would be a relatively simple and safe exercise.

He was wrong. As promised, the first chopper appeared overhead and disgorged several bundles onto a designated drop zone near Base Camp. But between the rocks and a slightly excessive dropping altitude, the load was scattered across the landscape. Rushing to the site, Sonam was aghast to see beer cans hissing among the boulders. A great drinker, he was overcome with emotion as he saw his prized amber liquid flowing freely. With the help of some Sherpas, he retrieved as many cans as possible and started gulping the precious fluid.

With all the activity over the previous twenty-four hours, Kohli gave orders for a slightly less strenuous schedule on 29 September. The only

major activity called for Sisodia and five Sherpas to take loads up to Camp Two, but Sisodia fell ill at the halfway point and headed back. The Sherpas persevered, and two remained behind to open the route to Camp Three the next day.

Among the American friends, Sandy quietly disappeared, and before they knew it, he was at Camp One. Bill, meantime, was slowly overcoming his altitude sickness at the Sanctuary.

For Lute and Kohli, it was a day of planning. Given their progress to date, and with the calendar showing few days left in the climbing season, they needed to revamp the schedule for carrying loads to the higher camps in the shortest possible time. Once their calculations were complete, Kohli met with Bhangu and gave him a new list of the food requirements for Camps Three, Four, and Five. Though he did his best not to show it, Bhangu was understandably annoyed with the status of the food loads. Despite his meticulous packing instructions prior to departure for the Sanctuary, the rations had been hopelessly mixed en route. Through nightfall, he resorted food allocations for each of the climbers.

On 30 September, they implemented a full-blown lift up the Blessed Goddess. Nearly all the Indian members shuttled loads up to Camp One. Even Lute and Jim, their nuclear expert, pitched in and carried supplies upward. To their collective surprise, Bill and Tom showed up that afternoon. With the exception of the porters, the Sanctuary helipad was now empty. Bill was exhausted from the hike but otherwise appeared to be in good health.

The Sherpas who had remained at Camp Two overnight set out in the morning to blaze a trail to Camp Three at the 21,200-foot level. Although this was just 1,000 feet higher in altitude, the challenges of the climb were increasing exponentially. Part of this was due to geology. The route they followed continued along a knife-edge ridge, only this time set at a seventy-degree slope. As before, the terrain consisted largely of rock—mostly

fragile schist—though pockets of snow and hard, glassy ice were growing more frequent. Compounding this was a high wind buffeting the upper reaches of the peak. Part of the challenge, too, came from the thinner atmosphere. As one approaches 21,000 feet, performing even simple tasks becomes exhausting. Dehydration begins to take a heavier toll due to poor appetite and heavy breathing in the oxygen-depleted air. To sustain itself, the body begins to burn the subcutaneous fat just below the skin. Robbed of insulation, human beings grow more sensitive to the cold.

Affixing crampons to their boots, the Sherpas slowly stamped their way up the rock and ice. They took turns at the lead, hammering anchors into the mountain's face and threading a series of safety ropes through them. After fixing a line halfway to their target over the course of the day, they retreated down the slope.

More of the same was in store for 1 October. All available hands participated in a major supply shuttle to Camp One. For Sonam, Rawat, and Kohli, it was their first time at that level, which they accomplished with no health complications. All the members and Sherpas, in fact, were in good condition and had plenty of momentum. Making up for lost time, even Tom made the hike to Camp One late in the day and returned to base in the evening. Between his lack of proper acclimatization and some strong winds —as well as the fact that he was a rock technician, not an alpinist—this was a particularly impressive feat.

Farther up the mountain, Sisodia and three Sherpas took turns extending the route to Camp Three. Inching upward in the cold, they barely added any rope before calling it a day. This delay in opening Camp Three was starting to cause concern. The next day, 2 October, a pair of Sherpas again looked to complete the route, only to radio back that they were short 600 feet of safety line. Growing impatient, Kohli arranged for a final coil of rope to be rushed upward from Base Camp. He also made it clear that they

needed to have tents pitched at Camp Three by the following day; if not, they risked falling hopelessly behind schedule.

This became even more critical when some porters arrived from the Sanctuary and reported that a chopper had made an especially large delivery earlier that day. Besides live goats—one of which they delivered to General Thondup—the shuttle included several specially sealed crates. Exchanging knowing glances, Lute and Bill headed toward the Sanctuary to oversee the unpacking of the generator and sensor equipment.

The next day, fourteen porters filed into Base Camp. Among other supplies, they were hauling half the secret gear in unmarked plastic containers. These were exceptionally heavy loads, but there were fewer complaints than expected among the porters, because all were sporting new boots, which had also been delivered the previous day.

Jim came over and inspected the crates. He looked extremely pale and was obviously in pain, the result of having overexerted himself by spending the previous night at Camp One. His headache was so severe that Sonam and some Sherpas had been forced to carry him down to the base. They gave Jim a lot of credit, though. He had no prior climbing experience, yet he was doing his best to keep up with the veterans. Now he had fallen ill, and they prayed that he would not need to be evacuated before fueling the generator.

Jim's health was not their only pressing concern. From high up on the slope, Wangyal raised Base Camp on the radio and reported that he had led a group of Sherpas all the way up to 21,200 feet. He sounded strong but said that any further move toward Camp Four would have to wait until after Camp Three was properly established the next day. Hearing this news, Kohli mentally reviewed the calendar. Anxiety was building in his mind, because he knew that their progress had slowed appreciably. With another two camps to go, he was not sure if there was enough good weather left in the season to reach the summit.

More delays followed. On 4 October, the low-altitude porters decided to take a day off to celebrate the end of Dussehra, a ten-day Hindu festival celebrating the defeat of Ravana by the Lord Rama, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil. Large effigies of Ravana are normally set alight on the final night, but the paucity of wood at the Sanctuary made effigies and bonfires out of the question. They were given a goat to eat instead, but unfortunately, a large carnivore—a bear or snow leopard, they never knew which—came during the night and left behind only bits of their intended barbecue. The gods, apparently, were not happy.

For the rest of the expedition members, it was a day of good gains on the slope. Sandy and Tom both made it to Camp Two, which was the highest point the American climbers had reached thus far. And finally, a four-man tent was pitched to properly open Camp Three.

To that point, the expedition had been little different from any other attempt on a major peak. On 5 October, however, the covert nature of their mission became apparent. Back on the job after their one-day holiday, the porters brought the rest of the summit gear to Base Camp. Lute, Bill, Bhangu, and Kohli broke open the crates and spent the day sorting through the monitoring equipment. Most of the sensor components were divided among reinforced cardboard boxes that fit on jerryrigged backpacks. A more specialized pack with a small platform on the bottom had been made to carry the generator. Additional crates held oxygen cylinders and masks, which might be needed for those climbers going through the strain of assembling the sensor near the summit.

By the time they finished, the sun had nearly set. They had good reason for cheer that night. Dr. Tripathi, who was doing yeoman's work monitoring their health and tending to their scrapes and bruises, was celebrating his thirty-seventh birthday. The goat that had arrived three days earlier found itself on a spit over a campfire, the feast for an impromptu

party. Afterward, General Thondup, showing his characteristic innovation, made a dessert that passed for a cake in appearance if not taste.

Unfortunately, their celebrating proved short-lived. When the sun dawned on 6 October, the skies looked ugly. From the vantage of Base Camp, the summit was obscured as shades of gray began to envelop the top of the peak. Slowly, the entire mountain was consumed by snowfall. Racing against time, Kohli beckoned all their porters from the Sanctuary helipad. The six strongest were singled out and deputized to help carry loads to Camp One. This was far beyond their original terms of employment, but surprisingly, they agreed with relatively little protest. They joined all the available Sherpas, as well as Lute and Bhangu, in making the shuttle. The rest of the members struggled through the deteriorating weather to haul supplies up to the two higher camps.

On 7 October, the skies showed no sign of clearing, but they pressed ahead. The most delicate part of their mission took place that morning. Sitting in front of a large olive-drab box with radiation warning labels on all sides, Jim broke the safety seals and peeled off the top. Inside, seven radioactive fuel rods were nestled in individual glass cradles. With great dexterity, he delicately pulled each one out in turn and inserted it into the generator. Throughout the process, the others instinctively kept their distance. When it was over, the collective sigh of relief was audible. Coming forward, they could immediately feel heat emanating from the sides of the generator five feet away. Oblivious to any danger, the Sherpas snuggled up to the device, warming their hands and patting their faces. Despite Jim's assurances that the chance of dangerous radiation exposure was minimal, the friends and members were not inclined to join the Sherpas.

Now that the fueling was completed, they lost no time in sending the summit gear up to Camp One. Rawat and Wangyal led the party, with the Sherpas arguing over who would have the privilege of carrying the toasty

generator. To err on the side of caution, Jim gave each of them a white badge to be pinned to the front of their parkas; in the unlikely event of excessive radiation leakage, the badge would change color. As an added precaution, Kohli instructed the Sherpas not to carry the load for more than four hours at a stretch before handing it off to a colleague.

Those at Base Camp watched them file up the mountain and then followed events over the radio. By noon, Rawat and Wangyal had reached Camp One without too much difficulty. Farther up, the story was different. At Camp Three, high winds tore the tent and forced two resident Sherpas to descend one level. Though Sandy and another Sherpa took their place shortly thereafter and made the necessary repairs, Kohli could not shake a sinking feeling in his stomach. They still had two camps to establish, the climbing season was about over, and Bill—who represented the policy end of their mission—was constantly reminding them of the need to get the sensor in place as soon as possible. The race was on, and they were living on borrowed time.

CHAPTER SIX

Camp Four

By the end of the first week of October, the team's collective spirit was spent. It had been a wild expedition thus far, with most of the climbers going on energy reserves they never thought they had. But with a lack of nutrition (no slight to Thondup and his valiant efforts in the kitchen), the thin air, and the foul weather, adrenaline had its limits.

The Blessed Goddess must have seen all this and taken pity. On the morning of 8 October, the skies dawned slightly more blue than gray. Scrambling to take advantage of this window of opportunity, all available friends, members, and Sherpas began shuttles up the slope. Lute and Bhangu accompanied the most precious load—the sensor and generator—as far as Camp Two.

Though the weather was cooperating, not much else was. Sonam suddenly fell ill and took time off to rest. Meanwhile, six of the porters retained at Base Camp began a sit-in to protest their inadequate conditions. Kohli later persuaded them to rejoin the effort, but he sensed that they were still teetering on the edge.

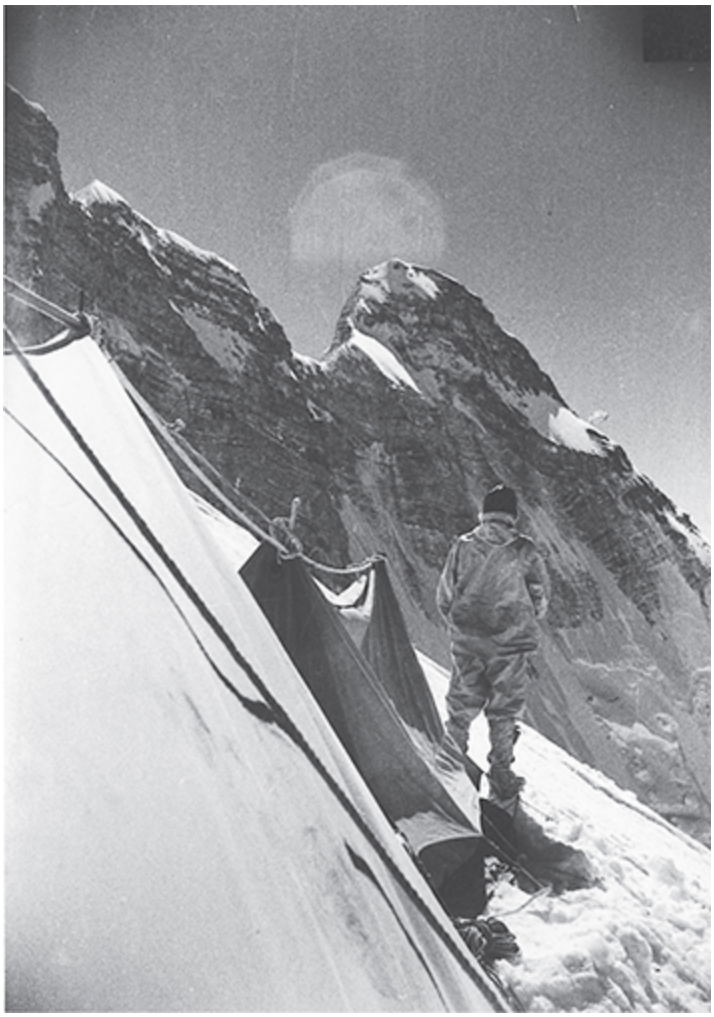
On a more mystical note, while hiking from Base Camp to the Sanctuary helipad to help manage the porter situation, Wangyal had an experience that stretched credibility. Across the Rishi Ganga, he sighted a bipedal creature, estimated at fifteen feet tall, silhouetted in the twilight glow. He stripped off his backpack to get at his camera, but the beast bounded off in long strides before he could bring it into focus. When Wangyal reported all this back at Base Camp that night, his colleagues were somewhat concerned. As the strongest climber, he was certainly not prone to hallucinations induced by altitude sickness. They also knew him to have a good head, and he was not one to exaggerate. Though some of the

Sherpas and porters were quick to assume that he had spotted a yeti—the abominable snowman of Himalayan lore—it was more likely an extremely large and potentially dangerous bear.

Sherpa Kalden hauls supplies up Nanda Devi. In the left background are some of the U.S. “friends.”

Yeti or not, they pushed ahead with a hectic schedule on 9 October. The weather held during the first half of the day, which allowed some good progress. To their surprise, not only did several of the porters carry supplies to Camp One, but some—despite their lack of proper mountaineering clothing—even pressed on to Camp Two. The climbers heaped praise on this group, and they fully deserved it. Though they were often written off as

underskilled hired hands, at least some of the porters were proving themselves as robust as virtually anybody else on the mission.



Camp Three, Nanda Devi. In the background is Nanda Devi East.

From Camp Three, a pair of Sherpas pushed upward toward the 23,750-foot level. Here the monochromatic expanses of gray rock fully gave way to calf-deep powder. Remaining alert to the danger of slab avalanches released from the higher slopes, they fixed safety ropes for the final 400 feet before arriving near their target at 1600 hours. Looking to excavate a sleeping platform for Camp Four, they sighted a small rocky depression that had been used in all of the previous expeditions to the peak. By that hour, however, snow had started to fall, and the wind was blowing furiously. After pitching a pair of tents in haste, the two Sherpas reversed

course and came down. En route, they passed Tom and Sandy. The two Americans had arrived at Camp Three the previous day and were now intent on spending a night at the fourth level. Encountering the same strong winds, however, they were quickly turned back.

After a day of exertion, Kohli allowed those at Camp Three to spend 10 October recuperating. They were joined later that afternoon by Lute, Bhangu, and three Sherpas, each of whom was carrying components of the sensor and generator on his back. As before, the Sherpas snuggled next to the generator and its warm aura. Meanwhile, Sonam and another party of Sherpas moved upward in their wake, reaching Camp Two by nightfall.

All this progress was giving them critical mass high on the slope. With Camp Four already established but unoccupied, the summit was now nearly within reach. In theory, a few more days of moderate weather would be all that was necessary to make the final surge through Camp Five and to the top. “We said extra prayers that night,” recalled Kohli, “as we entered this most critical stage of our expedition.”

Just as quickly as their spirits had been raised, they were dashed the following morning. Peering from his tent toward the sun, all Kohli could see was a solid bank of steel gray. Because of the limitations of their walkie-talkies, messages had to be relayed up and down the slope between camps. Predictably, the news from Camp Three was not good. Under a heavy snowfall, the three friends, one member, and five Sherpas were confined to their tents for the day. Poor appetites and deadened taste buds made it difficult for them to take in food and stock up on the calories they would need for the climb ahead.

Down at Base Camp, frustrations were mounting. Along with Bill and Jim, Kohli shared a feeling of helplessness, knowing that their last and best chance of reaching the summit was slowly slipping away. To take their minds off the weather, Jim and Kohli suited up and climbed the nearby ridgelines. They came back to camp feeling tired but no less tense.

When the sun hit the summit of Nanda Devi on the morning of 12 October, the weather was still miserable, but not quite as miserable as the previous day. Mustering all their energy, Sonam and his party of four Sherpas made the hike up to Camp Three. Fourteen climbers were now squeezed into that small site. Though this added even further to the critical mass at the third level, intermittent snow prevented any upward progress.

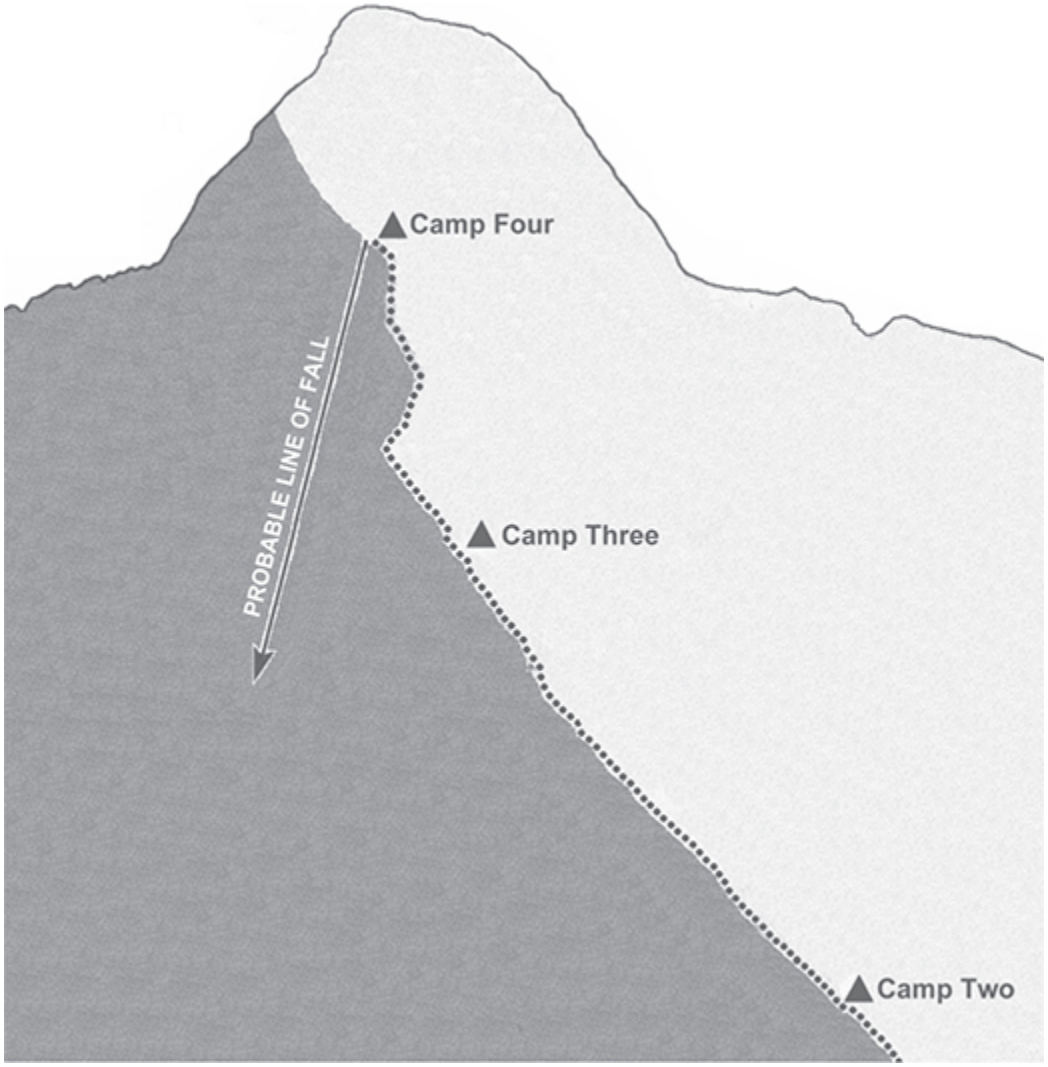
The bad weather continued through 13 October. With heavy snow falling at all the camps, upward and downward movement along the slope came to a complete standstill. Desperate, the three Americans at Camp Three ventured outside of their tents. Braving the blizzard, Tom, Lute, and Sandy decided to make a forlorn bid for the fourth level, but they soon turned back.

Going to sleep that night, Kohli could sense defeat. “We had given it our best shot, but the climbing season was over and every responsible expedition leader knows when to order a tactical retreat,” he remembered. “To do otherwise is to take unnecessary risks with the lives of the climbers.” He decided that if the weather had not improved by morning, he would have little choice but to throw in the towel for the season.

Whether the Blessed Goddess heard their prayers, or whether she was merely toying with them, the skies were partly clear—just enough to give them a ray of hope—on the morning of 14 October. Those at Camp Three hardly needed prompting to suit up. Seizing the chance, thirteen of the fourteen persons at that level donned backpacks and headed up toward Camp Four.

In the lead, Bhangu and Sherpa Dawa Norbu, tied together with a safety line, were pushing their way through the four inches of fresh snow clinging to the loose rock. Behind them, Sandy was leading another rope with Tom in the rear. Despite his stellar ability on rock walls, Tom was having a hard time at high altitude and had slowed his pace considerably. Impatient, Sandy violated mountaineering protocol and decided to unrope

from his partner for a stretch. Later thinking better of it, he reattached his line, and together they continued their climb. They had nearly reached the midway point when the Blessed Goddess called for a sacrifice. As a section of rock and snow gave way, Sandy lost his footing. The rest came in slow motion. Hearing a shout and looking backward, Bhangu watched in horror as Sandy started to tumble past his partner. The safety line went taut for a split second, then Tom was also yanked off balance and started to slide backward in the soft snow. Trying in vain to stop their fall with ice axes and crampons, the two began to build speed. Three hundred feet below, Sonam and his Sherpas saw the pair plunging toward them, plumes of powder spewing in their wake. Instinctively, Sonam plotted their likely path and moved to intercept. It was a life-saving calculation. As the two Americans drew near, Sonam and his partner pounced on their colleagues and held firm. Luckily, neither Tom nor Sandy suffered any injuries in the soft snow. Had they continued for another 100 feet, both would have been swept off the ridge.



Camps along the south face of Nanda Devi

By early afternoon, all the climbers had reached the two tents that constituted Camp Four. Six sherpas—including Dawa Norbu, who had scaled Nanda Devi the previous year—and Bhangu elected to remain there with the boxed equipment and the generator; the remainder retreated back down the slope.[1]

Rawat, Wangyal, Wangyal II, and a Sherpa had left late that afternoon to replenish the food supplies at Camp Three. After dropping off their loads, they decided to retrace their steps, but given the fading light and intermittent flurries, they were reduced to a crawl. Late in the evening, Kohli attempted unsuccessfully to get an update on their progress over the

radio. At 2200 hours, he tried to get some sleep not knowing whether his colleagues were safe. The minute the sun broke the horizon the next morning, Kohli was back on the radio. Relaying a message up to Camp Two, he waited for an answer. After what seemed an eternity, a voice crackled back. Through the static, he heard Rawat report that his party was safe, though their harrowing night trek was not something he wanted to repeat.

It was the only good news all day. With the snowfall heavy again, everybody was pinned in their tents, and further upward movement was stymied. Sonam, stuck at Camp Three, was in severe pain because the frostbite on his back, which he had suffered on Everest, was starting to flare up.

None of this could compare to the critical situation at Camp Four. Huddled in a pair of tents with the thin air squeezing their lungs, Bhangu and the six Sherpas were miserable. At 23,750 feet, the inherent irrationality of mountain climbing becomes fully apparent. Wrapped in their sleeping bags, all were suffering with coughing fits, headaches, and nausea. Several needed to remain propped upright, concentrating on pulling in every breath. None of them wanted to eat—their appetites were gone, and the act of food preparation was too exhausting—so no nutrients were going in. This, combined with pronounced dehydration over the past few days, left them gaunt and listless.

These developments threw Kohli's original plan into disarray. He had intended for Sonam and his Sherpas to pick up the gear at Camp Four, carry it through Camp Five (at about 24,500 feet), and place it near the summit. Once their energy had been expended, they would be replaced by Bhangu, Wangyal, Lute, and Sandy, who would work together to assemble and activate the device. If this took more than three hours, Rawat and a reserve team of Sherpas would move up to finish the task.

Now, Sonam was out of contention due to his recurring frostbite, and Bhangu, after his prolonged wait at Camp Four, would probably be too weak for strenuous activity near the summit. Moreover, they had yet to blaze a trail to Camp Five. In an act of desperation, several of the Sherpas pulled on their parkas and boots and, braving the snow, attempted to claw their way up the next 750 feet. They got barely a quarter of the way before they were beaten back.

Through the walkie-talkie relay, Kohli consulted with Lute at Camp Three. He reported that the Sherpas were beginning to grumble, which, given their normal loyalty and stamina, was a very bad sign. Despite Sonam's back pain, Lute sought his help in determining the best course of action. Quite obviously, they faced a pivotal point in the mission. Sonam, Lute, and Kohli agreed that a temporary retreat at that point would be extremely bad. Given the gains made and the amount of energy expended thus far, morale would plummet if they told the Sherpas to make a tactical retreat toward the base. And once they were down, it would be nearly impossible to get them to head back up again. But at the same time, having them languish high on the slope waiting for the weather to clear was not a viable alternative. It might take a week before the skies cleared, and for every day they waited, their collective health fell a notch. This was especially critical for those at Camp Four, where a death induced by the high altitude was possible, even probable.

After further radio relays, they arrived at a compromise solution. In the event of bad weather tomorrow, those at Camp Four would be permitted to go down to Camp Two, but no lower. Bhangu passed this message to the Sherpas, who took the news with emotionless grunts that passed for acceptance.

Everything hinged on the weather for 16 October. If it was reasonably clear, the mission was back on track. If it was bad, they would either be

calling men off the mountain or notifying somebody's next of kin about a fatality.

It was an anxious moment when Kohli peered from his tent that morning. Immediately, his heart sank. Fresh snow was piled near the tent flap, and flakes were coming down at a steady pace. Looking skyward, he could see Nanda Devi wrapped by flurries. Intentionally procrastinating, he waited until 0800 hours before raising the camps over the walkie-talkie for an update on conditions. There was a blizzard along the entire slope, he was told, and the climbers at Camp Four were now looking for him to make good on his promise.

Kohli waited several minutes. Bill was by his side, but the CIA case officer had no ready answers concerning mountaineering matters. Calling the climbers down from the slope was the right thing to do, but Kohli could not bring himself to do it—not just yet, anyway. He spoke via relay with Lute and asked him to stay through the morning. A few hours later, Lute's voice crackled over the radio. He had made his way down to Camp Two and could talk to Kohli directly without the need to relay messages. The snow was continuing, he said, and it had reached the point where the lives of the men were in definite jeopardy. Everybody on the mountain should begin coming down to Base Camp.

Having run out of options, Kohli concurred with Lute's assessment, and Bill nodded in agreement. Kohli relayed his decision to Lute, and then he and Bill immediately sent radio messages to their respective superiors in New Delhi to get their approval for what was already a fait accompli. To their credit, those in the capital deferred to the judgment of the mountaineers. Given the dangerous conditions, there was some urgency to their decision. They also knew that the order to recall the climbers was tantamount to bringing the expedition to a close. If they came down, there would be no going back up—not until the next climbing season in the spring of 1966.

Lute quickly passed the word to Camp Three, which forwarded the message up to Camp Four. All across Nanda Devi, the climbers suited up. Given the risks, they did not pause to police their trash or collect extra equipment, which included the sensor and generator. It had been hard enough hauling that load up to Camp Four, so it seemed foolish to repeat their efforts the next season. Since the components had been built to withstand the hardship of the mountain (the generator's shell was reportedly fully resistant to rust and corrosion), and since nobody else would be scaling the peak (Kohli had ensured that the Indian Mountaineering Foundation would not approve any climbing permits for the Sanctuary), it seemed like a good idea to safely secure the gear at Camp Four to await their return. Kohli gave his approval, then radioed New Delhi for retroactive consent. Again, those in the capital deferred to the reasoning of the mountaineers.

Bhangu oversaw measures to safeguard the device on the slope. There were five loads in all: four cardboard boxes containing elements of the sensor, and one for the generator. Finding a suitable cavity adjacent to the Camp Four tents, he and the six Sherpas wrapped the boxes with nylon rope and secured them to the rock using pitons and carabiners. Special care was taken with the generator, which was anchored by extra rope. Nearly a third of the load was sheltered inside the cavity. Once this task was complete, the seven vacated Camp Four and moved down to the third level. From there, Bhangu relayed word of the steps taken to secure the generator, which Kohli duly passed on to New Delhi over the radio.

By late the following morning, everybody was off the slope. Reaching ARC director Kao on their hand-cranked set, Kohli reported that all the climbers were safe, but the weather was still extremely bad. The climbing season was long over, he said without mincing words, and it was impossible to even think about tackling Nanda Devi again that calendar year. Kohli paused for Kao's pro forma response. With little choice, the intelligence

officer announced what those at Nanda Devi already knew: the expedition was over.

Now that the climb was finished, the expedition members shifted gears and began planning their staged egress from the Sanctuary. In hindsight, Kohli realized how lucky they had been. Of the six Sherpas who had spent two days at Camp Four, four had frostbite on their fingers. Dr. Tripathi immediately attended to them, and fortunately, none lost any digits.

Over the next two days, they busied themselves packing supplies and shifting them to the Sanctuary helipad. All available friends, members, Sherpas, and porters participated in the haul. By 19 October, there was almost no trace of Base Camp. The next morning, Kohli and his colleagues bid farewell to the Americans. They had been a fantastic bunch, and the camaraderie felt by the Indians was sincere. Said Kohli, “Lute, in particular, had been a great friend and colleague. Bill, who I got to know well at Base Camp, was extremely open and warm, not at all the stereotype of a cloak-and-dagger CIA officer.”

By noon, three chopper shuttles had taken the Americans and their personal equipment back to Gauchar. Most of the Indians suspected that they would be together for an encore climb next spring. Leaving by helicopter the same day was Sonam, who was in poor shape due to his recurrent frostbite. Dr. Tripathi attended to him during the flight.

An Indian Air Force Alouette chopper helps remove supplies from the Sanctuary helipad in the shadow of Nanda Devi, 21 October 1965.

On 21 October, there was a major lift of the remaining supplies out of the Sanctuary. Since there were no Americans left, the scene was deemed suitably noncontroversial to allow the Indian Air Force to assist. Seven chopper shuttles were flown, five by ARC and two by regular air force crews. Together they hauled out some 3,000 pounds of gear, as well as the Sherpas, Sinha, and Kohli. By the time the last Mi-4 lifted off, the falling

snow had reduced visibility to near zero. When the chopper reached Gauchar, it was still encrusted in a frosty glaze. Kohli recommended that the ARC pilot, Flight Lieutenant Davinder Suri, be given a gallantry award, but because the mission was classified, no citations were deemed possible.

That same evening, Kohli was back in New Delhi. Pushpa, his wife, was overjoyed to see him, and the feeling was mutual. She had not been told when he would be back, and his return came just three days prior to Diwali, a major Indian festival when family gatherings are customary.

Kohli was lucky. For security reasons, the porters were not cleared for helicopter transportation and were scheduled to go home the same way they had arrived in the Sanctuary: a long march. To avoid the impression that the climbers were abandoning them, and especially to keep them in a positive frame of mind in case they were needed again the following year, six of the members—Rawat, Bhangu, Wangyal, Wangyal II, Gautam, and Sisodia—were directed to accompany them. Before they left, General Thondup prepared sufficient food to last four days. Doing double marches, they hoped to make it out of the Sanctuary and to the closest village—Lata—within that time frame.

It was to prove an overly ambitious schedule. Due to a heavy snowfall en route, they took an additional forty-eight hours, leaving them without food for two days. Fatigued and hungry, Wangyal suggested literally tightening their belts to the point that the pain would take their mind off their empty stomachs. “It worked,” said Bhangu, “but just a little.” Upon reaching Lata, the two Wangyals, who were far ahead of the column, fetched some wheat flour and cooked up two dozen chapatis. They then proceeded to consume all twenty-four, to the dismay of the others.

Finally reaching Joshimath, the members bid good-bye to the porters and boarded a truck that had been dispatched to take them to the capital. Just as they pulled out of town, their vehicle collided with a police jeep,

causing some damage but no injuries. The Blessed Goddess, it seems, was bidding them a fond farewell.

1. All parts of the sensor and generator were lifted to Camp Four, with one exception. A small internal component of the generator, considered particularly delicate, was kept by Lute at Camp Three.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nanda Devi Redux

For B. N. Mullik and ARC director Kao, no detail about the aborted climb on Nanda Devi was too small or inconsequential. For weeks after returning to New Delhi, Kohli was summoned to countless meetings to review the expedition and its conclusion. Many of the sessions were held with T. M. Subramanian, Kao's deputy and ARC's primary liaison officer with the CIA station at the U.S. embassy.

After a month of such debriefing, the Indian and American intelligence agencies appeared to be fully satisfied with the decision to leave the sensor and generator at Camp Four. Both sides, too, agreed to go back to Nanda Devi in 1966. Kohli indicated that the earliest they could try again was May, when the land route from Joshimath to the Sanctuary would be negotiable.

By early 1966, however, there had been a crucial recalculation on the part of the CIA. For reasons known only to the scientists, they had decided that the sensor could, after all, be established on a shorter peak without hampering its collecting ability. This was good news to Mullik, who by now could appreciate that placing it on Nanda Devi was a very tall order. After further talks, it was agreed that, given the likely need to repair the sensor periodically, it would be better to take the equipment off Nanda Devi and place it on another peak with easier access. The May 1966 mission, therefore, would be focused on recovering the gear left behind on Nanda Devi for subsequent replacement at an alternative site.

The obvious question was which peak would be the new location. Because the CIA had now lowered its minimum required height, Kohli returned to one of his original proposals: 22,510-foot Nanda Kot. This mountain had merit for several reasons. First, it was located along the outer

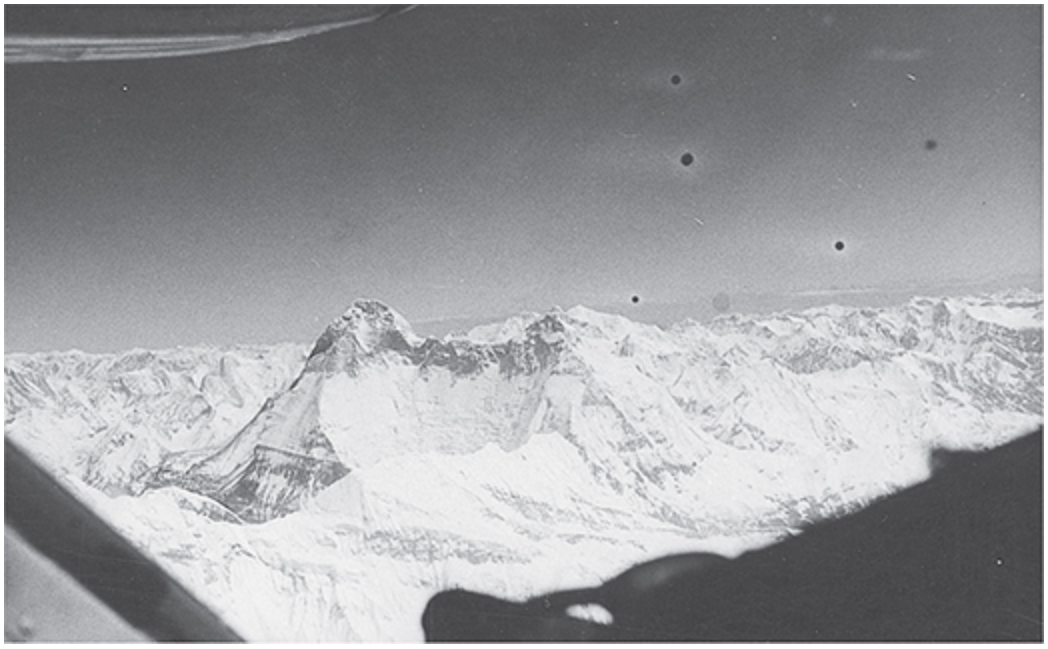
ring of the Sanctuary, which meant that it was directly accessible from the outside without having to hike up the Rishi Ganga gorge and into the Sanctuary itself. This would greatly ease the logistical burden of hauling supplies to the base camp. Second, from a mountaineer's perspective, Nanda Kot had far fewer technical challenges than Nanda Devi. Not only was it more than 3,000 feet shorter, but its slope was less steep (aside from the final, sheer 500 feet), and there were few complicating overhangs or knife ridges. Moreover, Kohli had already climbed Nanda Kot and knew its idiosyncrasies, which included a gentle bulging incline of glassy ice, nicknamed the Dome, near the 22,000-foot level. According to the CIA's latest reworked calculations, the Dome would be a suitable height for the sensor.

Nanda Kot from the south. The Dome is the rounded flaring to the left of the summit.

But Nanda Kot would have to wait until they recovered the device from Nanda Devi. Before the climbers tackled the Blessed Goddess again, ARC was asked to conduct a reconnaissance flight to gauge snow conditions. On 26 April, a Twin Helio made a bypass of the peak. Most of it

appeared to be exposed rock, with only an occasional patch of white snow. Said Kohli, “I took this to be a particularly promising sign.”

Their encore expedition to Nanda Devi would be a far less glamorous outing than the first mission. For one thing, the timing was set for late spring or early summer, making for warmer temperatures and far less snow than in October. For another thing, bringing down equipment was much less taxing than hauling it up and assembling it at high altitude. As a result, Kohli estimated that the operation needed no more than four Indian climbers and six Sherpas (not including the cook, Thondup), plus a complement of low-altitude porters to haul supplies into the Sanctuary. The inclusion of U.S. mountaineers, he believed, was not warranted.



Nanda Devi photographed from a Twin Helio on 26 April 1966. Most of the upper reaches appear to be exposed rock.

Selecting climbers from among those participating in the October 1965 mission, he settled on Rawat as on-site leader. Rawat would be joined by Everest veteran Bhangu, along with Wangyal II and Sisodia. To assist them high on the slope, they selected the six toughest Sherpas from the last expedition. Sinha, the intelligence officer with climbing experience, would man the radio. The only American involvement would be a nuclear expert,

who would fly into the Sanctuary and remove the fuel rods after the generator was brought back to Base Camp. Kohli would remain in New Delhi to oversee logistical support.

Putting this plan into action, Rawat and Bhangu were in the capital by the close of April to procure the necessary food stocks. As before, Bhangu excelled as a logistician, meeting wholesalers at odd hours to scrounge up the requisite rations. Their provisions had to cover fifteen weeks, which they considered the absolute maximum time needed for the approach march into the Sanctuary, the climb itself, and the march back to Joshimath.

On 1 May, the five members and six Sherpas departed New Delhi after dusk in a single bus stuffed with supplies. At the last moment, Mohinder Singh, a youthful police officer on assignment to the Intelligence Bureau, was added to the group as titular head. He was a climbing novice and could offer nothing on the slopes, but the choice had been dictated by senior intelligence officials.

This time, with no fear of Pakistani paratroopers interrupting the drive, the climbers pressed on through the night and arrived in Rishikesh the next morning without incident. Because the bus would have a hard time on the unimproved roads farther north, the load was transferred to a three-ton army truck. Along with Dr. Tripathi, who joined them at Rishikesh, the party continued onward and reached Srinagar by 1800 hours. At nearby Gauchar, the expedition members slept in the same tents used the previous year. With the exception of some live chickens that had nearly succumbed from the heat, the journey had been remarkably problem free.

Driving through to Joshimath on 3 May, the team paused to hire a contingent of low-altitude porters. It was at that point that obstacles started to mount. In need of an estimated 112 porters for the long trek to Base Camp, they found few takers. Word of the previous year’s hardships had apparently made the rounds of the neighborhood, and nobody was going to fall for the false promise of going only as far as Lata village. Adding to

their problems, local bureaucrats informed the climbers that they did not have the proper permits to buy sufficient rice for the fifteen-week expedition.

Rawat and Bhangu took on the town's bureaucracy. After a few well-placed calls and patient explanations, they left the district office with the needed rice permits in hand. They then began dividing these rations into sixty-pound bags for the hike into the Sanctuary. At the same time, Sisodia sought out a local labor contractor to help find the porters they needed. Unfortunately, he settled on a middleman who proved a bit shady. While Sisodia stood by, the contractor took to a soapbox in the town square and promised prospective hires that they would receive new clothing and footgear if they joined the mission. In fact, no such perks had been approved or budgeted. Sisodia protested, but it was too late; the damage had been done. Pressed for time, he made some limp pledges that they would consider the promised clothes and shoes upon reaching Base Camp.

With a full complement of porters again hired under dubious circumstances, Bhangu set out on the early evening of 4 May for Lata. General Thondup (who rightfully should have been sporting a second star on this expedition) went with him and established a temporary roadside kitchen. The remaining members, Sherpas, and porters arrived close to midnight and set up camp in a nearby field. Between Thondup's solid meal and the clear skies, morale seemed high.

It was not to last. The following morning, the porters began clamoring for their entitlement of clothes and shoes. This opened a virtual floodgate of demands—everything from blankets to cigarettes—with the porters finally stating that they would not move unless their conditions were immediately met. Hearing of this, Rawat and Bhangu were not amused. The contractor had done them no favor by padding the terms of employment, effectively undermining their pool of labor from the opening minute. The two vented on Sisodia, who should have been more forceful during negotiations.

Despite his benign appearance, Rawat could be deceptively hard. Addressing the disgruntled crowd, he took on the role of bad cop. The contractor had not been forthright, he told them, and any promises beyond their base salary were not true. If this was not satisfactory, he said, they could leave. Twenty-three porters voted with their feet and headed home.

The team's headaches did not stop there. Sinha promptly fell sick and returned to Joshimath, reducing the number of Indian members to five. As titular head, Mohinder Singh was far from happy about events, but he was at a loss as to the way ahead. Stepping forward to fill the leadership void, Rawat and a Sherpa decided to stay behind and recruit more porters, while the remainder continued the hike into the Sanctuary.

For the next ten days, problems escalated. En route through the Rishi Ganga gorge, another twenty-five porters deserted because they could not handle the cold. Needing to replace this added shortfall, Mohinder and Bhangu headed back to find yet more new recruits. But as Rawat had already discovered, there were few spare laborers willing to make the trek; even the promise of enhanced wages had no effect.

Battling freezing temperatures and unseasonably deep snow, the rest of the team, belatedly rejoined by Rawat, reached the Sanctuary on 15 May. Mohinder and Bhangu were still in Joshimath trying to sort out the porter difficulties; in the end, a contingent was imported all the way from Nepal to make up the difference.

Among the members, the litany of setbacks was starting to take a toll. The relationship between Mohinder and Bhangu, in particular, was showing signs of strain. Besides his relative youth and lack of climbing experience, Mohinder had a cynical streak that rubbed others raw. At a vegetarian restaurant they had stopped at on the drive from New Delhi, for example, he had berated a courteous proprietor for serving a chicken dish. Most eateries, in fact, seemed fair game for his tirades.

There was another reason for their tension. While Bhangu was insisting that they start immediately up the Rishi Ganga, Mohinder was dragging his feet in the hope of avoiding the tough climb and getting an ARC helicopter lift into the Sanctuary. Not until 16 May did he reach B. N. Mullik by radio and express his desire for chopper support. Mohinder's request was particularly ill timed. Mullik was in a foul mood because the week before, China had conducted its third nuclear test in as many years. Estimated at five times the kilotons of the previous test, this latest explosion was also thought to contain some thermonuclear material. With Beijing making obvious strides in its nuclear program, the need to retrieve the Nanda Devi device and activate it atop Nanda Kot was all the more pressing. Stop wasting time dreaming of an airlift, the crusty security chief chided Mohinder, and do a double-march along the land route.[1]

Working their way through snow and rain, Bhangu, Mohinder, and their Nepalese porters finally entered the Sanctuary on 23 May and linked up with Rawat's party. Bristling because of the delays, Rawat immediately ordered them to shift their supplies up to Base Camp, which had been reestablished by his men two days earlier. By noon on 24 May, there was a grand reunion at Base Camp. Spirits were high among the parties, with the exception of Rawat, who was in a bad mood because the Sherpas had ignored his order to climb to Camp One that morning.

With the weather proving cooperative and most of the snow having melted off Nanda Devi's south face, everything was set for a major ferry shuttle on 25 May. In his baptism by fire, Mohinder, joined by four Sherpas, would carry a series of loads to Camp One, while the remaining two Sherpas would press on to Camp Two. In a repeat of the previous year, they also intended to persuade the low-altitude porters to help with the ferry to Camps One and Two and, depending on the weather, possibly even Camp Three.

As scheduled, Mohinder and the Sherpas left the foot of the mountain at 0900 hours. Almost as soon as they departed, an ARC chopper landed at the Sanctuary helipad. Aboard was Dr. Tripathi and a young intelligence officer named Dayalu, the latter sent to replace the ailing Sinha. Because Dayalu was versed in wireless operations, this freed Bhangu from radio duties and allowed him to hit the slopes.

Though the mission seemed to be off to a good start, trouble was not far behind. On his first night at Base Camp, Dayalu began to show signs of altitude sickness. Ranting in a semiconscious state, he declared—with some hyperbole—that he was dying. Dr. Tripathi, who recognized that the condition was not life threatening, visited his tent and administered a few pills to induce sleep.

More serious was the nine inches of snow that inundated Camp One overnight, bringing further movement to a standstill until the sun melted some of the accumulation. Mohinder decided to use the downtime to venture outside his tent and do some calisthenics, which was a bad idea. Unaccustomed to the altitude, he immediately doubled up in pain. A pink froth began to seep from his mouth, a sure sign of liquid in the lungs and the onset of pulmonary edema. Unlike Dayalu's headache (which had eased by morning), Mohinder's affliction was serious, and the only cure was to get him to a lower altitude immediately. But with the snow making movement prohibitively dangerous, the doctor was forced to wait until 27 May before heading up to Camp One with a trio of porters. There he found the police officer writhing in pain and his eyes bulging from their sockets. The porters took turns carrying him down to the base for further medical attention.

Unfortunately for Rawat, who was trying his best to hold the expedition together, the two cases of altitude sickness planted a seed in the minds of the others. The next day, in the course of hauling supplies to Camps One and Two, the Sherpas conducted a sit-in and demanded

medicine for alleged headaches. This was the first time the hardy Sherpas had ever made such a request, and the Indian mountaineers were livid over this sign of fraying discipline.

Despite such real and fabricated medical emergencies, the expedition generally held to its schedule. There was little room for attrition among the three healthy Indian climbers and the six Sherpas, however, and Rawat kept everybody to a quick pace. Occupying Camp Two on the second day up the slope, they found the tent left from the previous season torn in three places. Bhangu and a Sherpa were forced to make tape repairs on 30 May in the face of razor-sharp winds.

On the last day of the month, Bhangu and four Sherpas pushed upward to Camp Three. To their dismay, they found that all the tents had been shredded by the elements; the remains of one were scattered twenty feet down the slope. They had to clear a new platform under freezing conditions and had erected a four-man tent by 1400 hours. All five were terribly fatigued by that time, in part because pitching the tent was hard work, and in part because they had been carrying such heavy packs. Besides their standard gear, they had slung more than two weeks of rations, two coils of rope, and a butane cooking canister. Piling into the tent, the Sherpas started melting snow with the butane burner while Bhangu radioed a status report down to Rawat at Camp Two.

For the first time in the mission, Rawat sounded genuinely pleased by events. They were almost within reach of their target, and he urged Bhangu to get sufficient rest and make the climb to Camp Four the next day. Once there, they were to waste no time bringing down the device. The most important item was the generator; the other boxes would be a bonus but were not deemed critical for recovery.

Along with three of his Sherpas, Bhangu was suited up and on the slope by 0800 hours. Though they had brought crampons and ice axes, there was barely a trace of snow and only an occasional patch of hard ice

embedded with scree. Most of the route took them across fractured gunmetal schist, which made for frequent slips. By midmorning, they were a mass of bruises caked over with a paste of sweat and gray mountain grime.

Their journey was made more difficult by the lack of fixed safety ropes. Although a series of lines had been left behind in October, the climbers found that their earlier handiwork had been snapped and buried along most of the route. Glimpses of orange and blue line occasionally protruded from the slope, but most was lost under streams of jagged rock that had sluiced down from the upper reaches of the peak during the winter.

As they neared Camp Four shortly before noon, snow started to pelt the mountain. Whipped by the wind, it stung the faces of the climbers as they struggled onward. Bhangu was in the lead when, squinting through the blizzard, he saw traces of orange nylon fifty feet farther up. He yelled words of encouragement to the Sherpa trailing the rope from his waist as they struggled across the final stretch. Crossing a last lip of rock, Bhangu stood atop the cramped platform that had held Camp Four, his chest heaving with the effort. He let his eyes run across a collapsed but intact tent. There was a butane canister nearby, as well as some utensils and dehydrated food rations strewn among rubble. He then looked to his left toward the shelf where he had secured the sensor eight months earlier. Bhangu's breath caught in his throat, as his brain began to register the sight before him. The rock shelf where he had left the boxes was completely gone, as if a massive knife had surgically severed that one corner of the slope.

A minute later, Bhangu's Sherpa partner arrived at his side. Moving closer, they identified the crushed remains of a single cardboard box holding one of the receivers. The other boxes and the generator were missing. Frantic, Bhangu peered over the edge where the shelf had apparently been swept. One hundred feet down, he saw what looked like a cluster of twisted wires. In between, the slope was a precarious heap of

jagged boulders set at a near-vertical angle. Intent on getting a closer view, Bhangu snapped a carabiner into a safety rope and gingerly worked his way over the void. As his Sherpa carefully played out the line, he leveraged off his ice ax and descended along the cliff. Halfway down, he froze. Having placed his weight on a narrow boulder ledge, he felt the platform start to shift. If the ledge collapsed, he would likely spark a slab avalanche, which in turn would release tons of rock above his head. Pivoting with all the grace he could muster in his cumbersome boots and padded alpine clothing, he crabbed sideways toward more solid footing.

After a twenty-minute descent, Bhangu reached the wires and scanned the debris. Bits of plastic and metal cable snaked out from a layer of gravel. In the hope that it might be connected to more substantive wreckage, he grabbed one of the cables and gave a tug. To his dismay, it pulled away instantly. The end had been cleanly shorn off. He spotted three other pieces of wire, but none was longer than four feet. Stuffing all of them into his backpack, he began his ascent to Camp Four.

Once he was back on the ledge, Bhangu squatted next to the collapsed tent. In a grim inventory, the Sherpas had laid out the rations and equipment recovered around the site. Besides the food, utensils, and butane jar, they had also found a spare radio that was surprisingly scratch free. Bhangu placed the recovered wires alongside this haul, and the four climbers huddled in silence.

Bhangu eventually broke the stillness. Taking out his walkie-talkie, he tried to reach Rawat. After several unsuccessful tries, he hopped over the other frequencies in an attempt to contact a familiar voice, but nobody was within radio range. Looking back down the slope, they could see several tiny figures making their way between Camps Two and Three. Dejected, Bhangu and the Sherpas made one more sweep around the campsite. Based on the position of the missing rock shelf and the wires recovered on the left side of the ridge, they guessed that the device had been carried in that

direction toward the glacier below. But with the snow limiting visibility, and with the descent of a sheer rock wall made especially dangerous in the desiccated air, they decided to postpone a more thorough search until reporting to Rawat.

They headed toward Camp Three and reached their tent in the late afternoon. It had been stocked with food in their absence, apparently by Rawat and Wangyal II, who had made a supply shuttle before descending back to Camp Two. Bhangu again tried to reach them by radio but still heard only static. When they failed to raise their teammates on the radio the next morning, Bhangu and the Sherpas decided they could wait no longer. Hiking down to Camp Two, they finally linked up with Rawat at 1430 hours.

When he heard the bad news, Rawat was at a loss for words. Eventually he conveyed a brief, pointed message to Dayalu at Base Camp, who relayed it to New Delhi. Anticipating that Mullik and Kao would demand another search around Camp Four, Rawat gathered his Indian climbers and Sherpas and announced plans to return to the site the next day. At this, the Sherpas uncharacteristically balked. Despite their stellar reputation for taking on the world's tallest peaks, this group had suddenly lost heart in the mission and announced that they were too tired to work as high as Camp Four. This put Rawat in a quandary. Realizing that he could not conduct a proper search without their assistance, he reluctantly gave them permission to rest at Base Camp. Putting a lie to their fatigue, they suddenly grew animated and scampered down the slope.

Alone, the three Indian climbers withdrew down to Camp One to contemplate their next move. There they found two porters who wailed through the night due to migraines brought on by altitude sickness. The mood proved contagious. Sapped of spirit and strength, Rawat, Bhangu, and Wangyal II brooded in desperation.

News of the missing nuclear generator hit New Delhi like a bombshell. That same afternoon, an emergency session was held with Mullik, Kao, and CIA officials from the U.S. embassy. To say that Mullik and Kao were in a panic would be an understatement. Though they had kept the Indian political leadership informed of the initial operation (Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, who died suddenly in January 1966, had been briefed the previous October), they knew that their necks were on the line for approving the decision to leave the generator on Nanda Devi over the winter.

Helming the meeting on the American side was forty-nine-year-old Tucker Gougelmann. A newcomer to India (he had arrived just a few weeks earlier as the senior CIA adviser for all U.S.-sponsored paramilitary projects in India), Gougelmann was a legend within the agency. A Columbia graduate, he had gone from college to the Marine Corps just prior to World War II. A major by the summer of 1943, he was serving as an intelligence officer for the marine airborne regiment before being assigned to a raider battalion during an amphibious landing at Vangunu Island in the Pacific. That transfer nearly sealed his fate. Just one day after landing, a sniper's bullet struck his left thigh from the rear, ripping through nerve and bone. The wound was gangrenous by the time he was evacuated to a field clinic.

For the next three years, Gougelmann was in and out of stateside hospitals. By June 1946, the doctors had done all they could for his stricken limb. He retired from the marines that month with a permanent limp and a new wife from a moneyed family in Oakland. Her father, owner of a racetrack and a fruit-canning company, wanted his son-in-law to inherit part of the business. Gougelmann, however, had his heart set on overseas travel. Leaving his spouse behind, he joined the foreign relief organization CARE as its Romanian representative. He would spend the next seventeen months

in that country, the last being detained by Romania's newly empowered communist authorities.

Tucker Gougelmann, the senior CIA paramilitary adviser in India, while posted to Saigon, circa 1970.

Released from jail after an international outcry, Gougelmann returned home to find that his wife had had their marriage annulled in his absence. Repeating the same formula, he married again—this time a New York girl—before leaving her behind to work for an aid organization in China. Again he was chased out by advancing communists, and he came home to a second divorce.

Given his passion for foreign adventure, Gougelmann joined the CIA in the fall of 1950. His first assignment was somewhat cloistered. Posted to a safe house on the outskirts of Munich, he served as an administrator for the CIA agent network under ex-Nazi spymaster Reinhard Gehlen. "Tucker came with two pairs of highly polished paratrooper boots in a footlocker," recalled one of his CIA superiors, "and little else."[2]

Though competent in the office, Gougelmann longed for the field. He transferred to Korea in the midst of the conflict on that peninsula and served

as a maritime case officer and later as chief of operations at a training base that turned out road-watching teams. “His leg did not stop him,” said fellow adviser Don Stephens. “He was still able to climb the rugged mountains with his students.”[3]

After returning from Korea with a refugee as his adopted daughter, Gougelmann served a stint as an instructor at Camp Peary. Not until the summer of 1959 was he again overseas, this time posted as chief of station in Afghanistan. The assignment hardly suited the gruff former major. Arriving with his infamous footlocker and ready to do battle, he was instead channeled toward the cocktail circuit to keep tabs on the Soviets in a more classic espionage duel. “Tucker was devoid of any social graces,” said fellow Afghan officer Alan Wolfe, “and ill at ease in such diplomatic settings.”[4]

By the time his Kabul tour finished in the summer of 1962, Gougelmann was yearning for a return to paramilitary action. The Vietnam conflict was fast escalating at that time, and a choice slot had opened up in the coastal city of Da Nang. To put pressure on the communist government in Hanoi, the CIA was mandated to begin a maritime raiding campaign using an exotic mix of Swift boats, Norwegian mercenary skippers, and Vietnamese frogmen. For the next three years, Gougelmann led this effort, often with more flair than success.

Gougelmann remained in Vietnam for another year, and it was then that he made his mark. While advising the South Vietnamese Special Branch—a police-cum-intelligence organization focused on the communist infrastructure—he organized a string of provincial interrogation centers. Despite his unpolished demeanor and proclivity for salty language, Gougelmann displayed a sharp, calculating mind in this role. “He could walk to an empty blackboard,” said one fellow officer, “and start diagramming the local communist party . . . from memory.”[5]

By the time Gougelmann got his India assignment in the late spring of 1966, he had inherited a full mandate overseeing assistance to ARC and Uban's commandos at Chakrata. When the nuclear device was discovered to be lost on Nanda Devi, however, that suddenly became his top priority. Going on war footing, he flashed a message back to CIA headquarters in Washington. The answer was immediate: a team of experts with technical recovery gear was on the way.

As expected, Kao sent a radio message to Base Camp on 3 June calling for a second search of the Camp Four vicinity. That request broke the three Indian climbers out of their funk, and they suited up. Unfortunately, the six Sherpas did not follow their lead. Despite dining on Thondup's fare at the base of the peak, they claimed chronic fatigue. This news disappointed Bhangu. He had been with two of the six on Mount Everest and was having trouble reconciling their current behavior with their earlier heroics. "They had climbed continuously for fifteen days on Everest," he recalled, "and some of them worked for twenty-four days straight." Now on Nanda Devi, despite better food and pay, they were feigning sickness and staging a filibuster.

Putting on his best diplomatic face, Bhangu ventured down the next day to negotiate with the Sherpas. The weather was hardly supporting his case, as an unseasonable three inches of snow had been dumped across the Sanctuary the previous night. Entering the kitchen tent, he appealed for the Sherpas to resume their high-altitude shuttles, but they laughed in his face. This was not exactly the reaction he wanted, and Bhangu was on the verge of exploding. Leaving the tent to let his temper cool, he found a convalescing Mohinder and Dayalu hovering uselessly on the periphery. (Mohinder had requested a helicopter evacuation, which eventually came by week's end.) Bhangu cursed their ineffectuality, then mentally heaped some criticism in Kohli's direction for allocating insufficient climbers and Sherpas for what was shaping up to be a very trying expedition.

The serenity of the Sanctuary eventually worked its wonders. After his anger subsided, Bhangu returned to the tent for a second round of negotiations. This time, the Sherpas had softened a degree. Shuttles up to Camp Three were no problem, they allowed, but not any higher. Satisfied with this qualified success, Bhangu looked to raise Rawat on the radio, only to find that the Sherpas had violated standing instructions and let the walkie-talkies go cold. They had to place them inside their parkas to defrost the batteries, and it was late afternoon before they were able to generate a signal.

By that time, Rawat and Wangyal II had hiked up to Camp Two. The next morning they intended to press up another level. In their wake, they asked Bhangu, the Sherpas, and any available porters to begin restocking the lower camps with food. As this fell within the limitations placed by the Sherpas, Bhangu led them up to Camp One on 5 June. The next morning, they continued to Camp Two without incident. But when he called for a further hike up to Camp Three, the Sherpas fell back to their familiar refrain of fatigue. Disgusted with their lethargy, Bhangu steeled himself to continue alone. But spying a fresh blanket of snow and recalling the patches of ice en route, he knew that safety protocol prohibited a solo trek. Irate over the waste of good climbing weather, he withdrew into the tent to await a willing partner.

Rawat and Wangyal II, meanwhile, had reached Camp Four and began snapping photographs for the benefit of officials in New Delhi. Looking over the geological evidence, they concurred that the generator had been carried off the left side of the ridge, either by a rock slide brought on by seismic activity (common in the Himalayas) or by an avalanche caused by melting snow, and then down the sheer southwestern face. Though that face extended all the way to the glacier at the base, they spied a slightly level snowy field at about the 18,000-foot level. Further searches, they reasoned, should be focused in that lower area.

Before retreating off the upper reaches of the peak, there remained two final orders of business. First, Rawat had been instructed by New Delhi to collect stone samples from each of the camps. Second, to erase all trace of their operation, they had to remove all their gear and refuse from the four sites. Rawat and Wangyal II packed up Camp Four themselves. On 8 June, two of the Sherpas broke from their earlier listlessness and began dismantling Camp Three. Eight porters, meanwhile, made the hike to clear out Camp Two, while another nineteen porters hauled the accumulated equipment down from Camp One.

As this was taking place, Bhangu momentarily found himself idle at Camp Three. He had earlier hiked there with Tashi, one of the more loyal Sherpas, before being ordered by Rawat to stand fast and rest before searching the snowfield at 18,000 feet the following day. For Bhangu, this news brought mixed emotions. Although he was pleased that they would not have to continue the strenuous activity of moving among the upper camps, he also knew that there would now be little opportunity to get close to the summit of the Blessed Goddess. A mountaineer at heart, he found it painfully unsatisfying to have gotten only as far as Camp Four.

It was then that the idea hit him. In a conspiratorial tone, he asked Tashi if he wanted to make an attempt on the summit that very day. On its face, the proposal sounded crazy. They were only at Camp Three, nearly 4,500 feet short of the top. All previous ascents had been staged from a fifth camp, and most took up to sixteen hours to reach the summit and return to the fifth level. Since they did not have Camp Five, and Camp Four had already been dismantled, Bhangu was suggesting an incredible round-trip from Camp Three.

Tashi listened quietly to the scheme, not sure if it was an enlightened challenge or suicide. Both of them were in peak condition, well rested, and acclimatized. Moreover, the weather was relatively warm, and much of the snow was gone. Perhaps feeling a bit guilty about his uninspired conduct

over the previous week, or perhaps listening to the call of the mountain, he agreed to make the climb.

Stuffing in as many carbohydrates as their bellies would allow, the two roped off before sunrise and started their ascent to Camp Four. In just two hours, they had reached that point. After resting for thirty minutes, they pushed onward. Almost immediately, the peak grew hostile. Unlike in the lower reaches, where the idiosyncrasies of the route had become almost second nature to the two, they were unfamiliar with the rock walls encountered above Camp Four. By noon, they had slowed to a crawl and were beginning to doubt the sanity of their effort. Then, just as suddenly, they crossed a last field of boulders and the slope opened up. Making surprisingly fast progress, they came to a final wall of splintered schist that easily crumbled under their weight. With an inner drive overriding the fog of hypoxia, Bhangu and Tashi studied this last stretch. Curling below and to the east, they came across a line of granite boulders that extended to the summit. They snaked up this route and were standing atop the Blessed Goddess at 1430 hours.

With an eye on the clock, the two immediately reversed course and pushed themselves as fast as safety would allow. Just as the sun was setting, they collapsed in a heap at Camp Three. It had been a remarkable climb, and performed in less time than any previous summit attempt. Getting on the walkie-talkie, they confided the details of their adventure to Rawat. Knowing that Kao would be infuriated by their lack of focus on the emergency at hand, Rawat made them swear to keep their accomplishment to themselves.

On 9 June, their mission became less of a mountaineering expedition and more of a geological investigation. On that day, Rawat, a barely rested Bhangu, and two Sherpas hiked to the former location of Camp One, then swung northwest for another mile. This brought them toward the likely line of fall from Camp Four along Nanda Devi’s southwest face.

The topography in this area varied widely. From the 18,000-foot level up to the broken ledge at Camp Four, there were virtually no rocky protrusions. The almost sheer granite wall was covered by an icy veneer with the depth and consistency of a skating rink. Because of this covering and the slope's sharp angle, any freshly fallen snow was quickly drained downward. It would have been almost impossible, they reasoned, for the device to become lodged in this zone.

At 18,000 feet, the face flattened slightly, allowing for an accumulation of powder. This was the snowfield Rawat had seen from above at Camp Four. But now that the climbers had taken a closer look from below, they were uncertain whether the device could have gotten stuck in the snow line, or whether the momentum from the fall would have carried the equipment past this shelf.

Between 18,000 and 15,000 feet, the face was divided into two steep gullies, known locally as nullahs. These nullahs were lined with a mix of granite boulders (some the size of small cars), flaky metamorphic rock, and sand. Both glistened with meltwater flowing from the uppermost reaches of the mountain; in the steepest areas, they featured icy cascades. If the device had tumbled past the snow line, it almost certainly would have headed down one of these two channels.

At the bottom, the nullahs emptied onto a glacier abutting the western side of Nanda Devi. Over 250 feet thick and six miles long, the glacier was grinding its way south along the floor of the Sanctuary at a steady pace of 60 feet a year. The friction it created in doing so opened pockets and channels on its underside, all of which were filled with murky sediment-laden water. And because it was late spring, the meltwater channeling down the nullahs carried a fresh layer of gravel, mud, and sand across its top. Together, this made for a surreal landscape, with the pockmarked glacier streaked blue and gray like a porous sheet of marble.

Taking all this in, the search party was a bit overwhelmed. If the device had somehow gotten stuck in the snow line around 18,000 feet, the chances of it remaining exposed were slim. If it had rolled into one of the nullahs, it could easily be hidden anywhere along its steep, rocky bed. And if the generator had reached the glacial moraine level, it might have been camouflaged under a thick layer of alluvial sediment deposited over the course of the previous winter and spring.

Looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack, Rawat took a walkie-talkie and binoculars and worked his way to a rocky outcropping at 18,000 feet. From there, he directed the other three up to the snow line, where they walked in a line, pausing every minute to survey the terrain for signs of man-made debris. They found a single nondescript steel ring, and although the metal appeared to be new, Bhangu was uncertain whether it came from their lost device or was trash from a previous expedition to the peak.

After an hour on the snow, Rawat steered them toward the entrance to the southernmost nullah. Climbing down such rock was markedly different from alpine mountaineering. Much of the upper stretch of the nullah was sheer, wet, and slippery. Whatever ice was present had been encrusted with scree, making crampons and ice axes less than effective. The spray from the waterfalls soaked the climbers to the bone, adding to their discomfort. Continuing downward until 1515 hours, they at last reached the moraine level. There the ice seemed to come alive, with running water popping and hissing under their feet. Edging across a glacial bridge, they continually prodded the ice with axes to make certain there were no hidden crevasses waiting to collapse.

Rawat soon caught up with them, and together they collected gravel samples and filled a canteen with meltwater before continuing toward Base Camp. Just short of their tents, they encountered a familiar face. Gordon Sleeper, the CIA technician who had first met them in Anchorage and then set up the relay station at Sandev, was waiting with a black box in hand. As

the climbers approached, they saw that his expression was deadly serious. Halting them in their tracks, he played with some dials on the alpha counter and then passed it over their hands and feet. Two other Americans—both experts from the Atomic Energy Commission—arrived alongside with similar equipment, which they used to test the gravel, water sample, and steel ring for emissions of alpha particles.

Curious, Bhangu asked what he was doing. Checking for radioactivity, Sleeper replied. He had already swept the stones from the four camps, as well as water from the Rishi Ganga. All gave normal readings.

What would happen if there were abnormal amounts of radioactivity? Bhangu queried. The water to Calcutta could become poisonous, responded Sleeper in a pained tone. Millions of Hindus taking baths in the holy Ganges would be affected.

1. “China Explodes H-Bomb,” The Statesman, 10 May 1966, p. 1.

2. Interview with James Critchfield, 9 November 1999.

3. Interview with Don Stephens, 14 April 2000.

4. Interview with Alan Wolfe, 28 April 2000.

5. Interview with Tom Fosmire, 22 June 1997.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mutiny

As the sun set below the Sanctuary's western wall, the ensemble of climbers, Sherpas, and Americans gathered at the kitchen tent for a spread of Thondup's culinary wonders. They ate in silence, a sense of failure hanging heavy over their heads. Rawat eventually broke the stillness with an announcement that he would be leading the climbers back across the nullahs and glacier at dawn.

One of the Americans, a sixty-six-year-old Atomic Energy Commission scientist named Slosky, cut him short. "If you dig for it," Slosky warned, "you could break the side of the generator." Without proper clothing or other precautionary measures, he advised putting their search on hold.

Senior government officials in New Delhi were in agreement. After exchanging a series of high-level cables with Washington—and bringing Prime Minister Indira Gandhi up to speed with a detailed background memorandum—it was decided on 11 June to regroup later in the summer after a more structured recovery program had been devised. In the meantime, those at Base Camp were to immediately move their equipment to the helipad and await a trio of chopper lifts the following day.

Kohli was in the capital while all this was transpiring. As he had yet to make an on-site appearance during the retrieval effort, he notified ARC of his intention to go on the first Mi-4 sortie into the Sanctuary. Kohli mentioned this to Defense Secretary Harish C. Sarin, who also happened to head the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. Sarin's longtime ambition had been to see the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, and he eagerly asked if he could join the ARC shuttle. The request was passed to Mullik, who, in the interest of maintaining good relations with the military, consented.

Early the next morning, the two of them flew up to Gauchar and transferred to the Mi-4. Their pilot was Flight Lieutenant Lalwani, who, under normal conditions, was a daredevil who regularly pushed the Soviet-made choppers to the peak of their performance in all forms of weather and terrain. That morning, however, he looked to the skies and did not like what he saw. It was very dark to the east, with a solid cumulus cloud bank promising heavy precipitation by noon. Knowing that time was short, Lalwani curled out of Gauchar and made his first run into the Sanctuary. They settled next to a pile of supplies that had been carried over from the now vacant Base Camp. The Indian climbers were on hand to offer polite greetings, as well as introductions to the three American officials.

Kohli and Defense Secretary Harish Sarin near the Sanctuary helipad, 12 June 1966.

From the chopper cockpit, Lalwani was uncharacteristically dour. He offered two options: either Sarin and Kohli could leave as soon as the helicopter was filled with supplies, which he recommended, or they could

wait for the second shuttle in two hours. Happily snapping photographs with his camera, Sarin had no intention of leaving on the first flight. With that decision, 200 pounds of gear was stuffed into the rear of the Mi-4, along with the three Americans and Dr. Tripathi squeezed in among it. The heavy chopper then lifted slowly from the helipad and disappeared in the western sky.

Sarin, meanwhile, had been taken by the Indian climbers to a makeshift campsite 300 feet from the helipad that was brimming with Sherpas and porters. The secretary was a bundle of energy, running through rolls of film and collecting a trove of plant and tree clippings for use as incense. He was having such a good time, in fact, that he waved off a seat on the second shuttle. By that time, Lalwani was even more concerned about the building cloud bank and wasted no time getting airborne; he knew it would be a tight race to complete a third sortie before the weather forced an abort.

By 1330 hours, that race appeared lost. The sky had turned ink black, snow was starting to fall, and Lalwani was more than half an hour late. Worse, the Sherpas and porters had departed by noon for the long hike back to Joshimath, leaving no kitchen. All that remained was a single two-man tent; the rest of the supplies had been taken out by the earlier Mi-4 shuttles or were being manpacked by the porters.

Sarin's earlier enthusiasm was now replaced by panic. Without food and proper clothing, he doubted that they could last the night. Thinking fast, Bhangu offered to run to catch up with the porters and bring some of them back to the helipad if a chopper did not land by 1600 hours. But fortunately, it did not come to that. At 1400, the skies cleared slightly. No more than five minutes later, the staccato thump of the rotors could be heard in the distance. A more relieved defense secretary could hardly be imagined. As Sarin and Kohli stepped aboard, they bid farewell to the four remaining

Indians—Rawat, Bhangu, Wangyal II, and Dayalu—who were to follow the land route to Joshimath.

Their adventure did not end there, however. They landed at Gauchar, picked up the three Americans, refueled, and headed for New Delhi. But just a few minutes out of Gauchar, lights started to flash on Lalwani's instrument panel. He made an emergency landing at a small field near Hardwar, and they waited for two hours as a minor repair was performed on the engine. Continuing on their hard-luck journey, they left Hardwar for what should have been a routine flight to New Delhi. Again, they had barely begun when a summer dust storm turned the late-afternoon sky the color and consistency of chocolate milk. Edging through the opaque air—and mindful that the engine intakes could get clogged with the airborne sand—Lalwani spent an extra hour reaching the capital. All the while, those in the back were depleting their adrenaline reserves.

That extra hour of flight time, it turned out, robbed the Mi-4 of enough fuel to reach Palam airport. Dropping low to scan the ground for alternative landing sites, Lalwani spotted a small runway north of New Delhi. He landed there safely, to the delight of those in the rear. Although Lalwani faced an inquiry the next day from the director general of civil aviation, it was quickly dropped after a few well-placed calls from the Intelligence Bureau.

Back in the Sanctuary, the last four Indians marched at a quickened pace and soon caught up with the column of Sherpas and porters. The snow had stopped by then, only to be replaced by a miserable cold drizzle that continued unabated for the next three days. Combating the resultant thick mud that clogged their path, they reached the village of Lata on 15 June. One day later, they walked the remaining distance to Joshimath, where a pair of trucks was waiting to take the four back to New Delhi.

If the Indian climbers thought that they were now entitled to a rest, they were sadly mistaken. As soon as they set foot in the capital, they were

greeted with a telegram from Kohli telling them to report to ARC director Kao's office the next day. They did as they were told and came away from the extended debriefing with a sense that the normally stoic Kao was genuinely pleased with their exertions over the previous two months.

Mullik, now serving as director general of security, was far less generous in his compliments. They reported to him on 23 June and were grilled by the crusty intelligence czar almost to the point of tears. After several hours of patient explanations by the climbers and terse retorts from Mullik, they emerged in the early afternoon, drained both physically and emotionally. "He did not care about our hard work," said Bhangu of the unpleasant exchange.

Not until 26 June were the mountaineers officially given permission to return home and take time off. Kohli alone stayed in the capital, where a series of high-powered meetings was held between U.S. and Indian intelligence officials over the following week. This culminated in a 5 July tryst among Kohli, the CIA's Tucker Gougelmann, and ARC official Subramanian for the purpose of hazard evaluation. They discussed three main categories of credible accident conditions and two other categories of less likely accident conditions.

The first category of credible accident conditions focused on the packing material inside the generator. Sandwiched between the graphite core and the aluminum housing was some low-density material. As the device rolled to the snow line or even below it, it was possible that the contents of the generator got crushed and compacted inside the housing due to the poor protection offered by the low-density packing. In this crushed but intact state, it might have reached the glacier, where it could be buried under soil or even carried into a stream.

The second credible accident condition hypothesized that the device was trapped in the snow line at 18,000 feet. Buried in snow during winter

and exposed during summer, it could remain static for years. No major structural damage was assumed in this case.

The last credible accident condition presupposed that the bottom lid of the generator's aluminum casing had been damaged by hard impact on rock. This resulted in the ejection of the graphite block, which in turn probably resulted in the fuel capsules coming free. Although this did not necessarily mean that the fuel capsules were damaged, this condition was deemed a significant hazard.

As for the two less likely accident scenarios, the first involved the device getting swept into a stream that carried it far down the Rishi Ganga. The second involved the fuel capsules hitting hard rock at extremely high velocity, shattering their shells, and exposing the tantalum cladding. If the cladding were also ripped off, the active alloy would contact the air and instantaneously burn due to its pyrophoric nature, giving off a puff of radioactive smoke.

Most of the accident conditions were contingent on when the device had fallen. If it had taken place during the early snowfall period—within the first few months after it had been left in October—the glacier and the foot of the southwestern face would have been covered with soft snow, which would have provided a good cushioning effect. Structural damage might not be great, and with the melting of the snow in the spring, the generator might have been carried downstream intact.

If the device had fallen down the mountain in the late winter or early spring, however, the snow on the slope would have been hard. Objects sliding down such hard, icy surfaces tend to bounce. Repeated bouncing would shatter the device, especially as it picked up speed in the fall. If the generator came apart and reached the surface of the glacier, the pieces could have gotten buried in soft soil or rock. Alternatively, the hot capsules could have come in direct contact with the glacier ice and sunk into its interior;

theoretically, they could have been carried in subterranean water flowing inside the glacier.

None of these scenarios could be discounted. Therefore, the expedition members were to operate under a worst-case scenario that posited radioactive material being released into the environment. For Kohli, it was the first time that the consequences of a nuclear-contaminated Ganges had been spelled out in grim detail. Looking quite somber, Gougelmann promised to support the recovery with air assets, technical gear, and climbers. Kohli agreed to lead a return expedition into the Sanctuary as fast as they could settle logistical issues.

Apparently, Mullik wanted all this done yesterday. On 7 July, Kohli was called to his office and ordered to gather a team and leave for Nanda Devi the next morning. Although he could sympathize with Mullik's desire for haste, he knew that leaping headlong into a major expedition without proper preparation would be counterproductive at best. Kohli had already started mapping out their search plan, but he needed another week to iron out the details. Besides, he explained, the next day, all the members of the 1965 Everest mission were set to receive the Arjuna, India's highest sports award, from the president. Several of the Nanda Devi climbers—Rawat, Wangyal, Sonam, and Bhangu—were waiting in the capital for that honor. Delaying their departure by an additional day, Kohli figured, was not unreasonable.

At this, Mullik exploded. "India faces an unparalleled national calamity," he fumed. "Forget the Arjuna."

It was the first time Kohli had ever seen Mullik reach the breaking point, and it was not a pretty sight. A consummate perfectionist, Mullik was not accustomed to operational setbacks and had no intention of being bested by nature and the elements. Moreover, he was under considerable personal pressure because the Nanda Devi operation bore his fingerprints more than any other official.

Knowing that continued debate was futile, Kohli left Mullik's office and beckoned two of his climbers, Bhangu and Wangyal, that afternoon. The Arjuna ceremony was off as far as they were concerned, said Kohli. Instead, they were heading back to Nanda Devi. Both were disappointed and sullen. Bhangu found the timing incredibly rushed; he, more than the others, could appreciate the effort that went into creating a coherent logistical plan. Still, they resigned themselves to the importance of the search and began packing. Joining them would be Dayalu, the intelligence officer who had manned their radio on the last outing. Rawat, who had been whisked away for an ARC aerial reconnaissance of the Sanctuary, would sit this one out in a support role. Kohli did not even bother to ask Sonam, who was still deemed vulnerable to frostbite.

That evening, Kohli stuffed a duffel bag with clothes. As if he did not have enough distractions, his second son, Ravinder, all of three weeks old, was in the military hospital with health complications, and Pushpa was at the baby's side. Kohli said some prayers and tried to get a few hours' sleep, but the phone rang, jarring him awake. It was Mullik; he had reconsidered and decided that it would be okay to delay their departure for a day in order to attend the Arjuna presentation. Kohli, still hurt by his earlier berating, had already spent the day mentally preparing himself for the morning trip to Joshimath. Not particularly caring how he came across, he thanked Mullik for the offer but said that he had no intention of changing his plans again.

By the evening of 8 July, Bhangu, Wangyal, and Kohli could not help but feel a sense of déjà vu. Just as they had done multiple times over the past year, they drove toward the district town of Joshimath, where they were becoming all-too-familiar guests, even though their activities were supposed to be a secret from the public. A few months earlier, the local army commander had wired a complaint up his chain of command about the frequent ARC helicopter flights over his cantonment. In response, he had been told to mind his own business.

As they drove farther east toward Lata, they came to the village of Tapovan. Barely a dot on the map, Tapovan sported a few earthen huts, a flimsy police shack, and a patchwork of withered, fallow fields. Under the summer sun, all moisture had been sucked from the surrounding landscape, leaving it a palette of tans and browns. Even the chickens were listless. Taking up residence near the police quarters, they set up Dayalu's radio and established contact with New Delhi. From the capital came word not to get too comfortable: the four of them, with barely enough rations to last a couple days, were instructed to prepare for immediate departure into the Sanctuary.

Before they had a chance to act, however, another message came through on 9 July countermanding the first. Bhangu and Wangyal, it read, were to return to New Delhi by the fastest means possible. Headquarters belatedly realized the folly of dispatching an expedition without proper supplies and now wanted the two to come back and procure the necessary items within a week. Exhausted, both grumbled as they repacked and flagged a truck for the return trip to the capital.

Now down to Dayalu and Kohli, the mission was becoming more farcical by the day. Looking to address the porter shortage experienced during their previous forays into the Sanctuary, Mullik had already written orders for the deployment of an entire company of Indo-Tibetan Border Police to Tapovan. This company was to be listed on paper as the cadre for a new Eighth ITBP Battalion; with his previous affiliation with the ITBP, Kohli was ostensibly to act as battalion commander. Although this immediately gave him more than 100 paramilitary troops—or jawans—that he could use to shuttle supplies into the Sanctuary, housing and feeding this sudden influx was a logistical migraine. Kohli began scribbling emergency requests to cut through red tape and get the requisite amount of staples to sustain them over the coming weeks.

Kohli had another headache as well. Because Dr. Tripathi was engaged elsewhere, the Intelligence Bureau had scrambled to find a replacement physician to accompany their mission. They eventually settled on an elderly general practitioner named Gupta. As soon as he arrived at Tapovan, warning bells went off in Kohli's head. With the doctor's advanced age and paunch, Kohli had visions of him sustaining a heart attack, a stroke, or both. Gupta had made no secret of his poor physical conditioning. When asked by ARC director Kao if he had ever trekked in his life, he reportedly quipped, "Only from the hostel to the classroom and back."

About the only bit of good news was the eleventh-hour arrival of Sisodia and a contingent of Sherpas, all of them seasoned from previous Nanda Devi outings. They took point and led a long column of ITBP jawans-cum-porters out of Tapovan, past Lata, and into the gorge.

As they wound their way up the Stairway to Heaven, Kohli kept a worried eye on Gupta. He was having trouble breathing and falling further and further back along the line. Before they departed, Kohli had instructed Dayalu to send a radio message to Mullik conveying his concerns about the doctor, but the security chief, evidently still in a foul mood, did not want to entertain thoughts of a delay.

It was a decision with fatal consequences. On the afternoon of 12 July, Gupta abruptly sat down on the side of the trail and would not get up. His eyes had turned vacant, and as he coughed, one could hear the mucus rumbling in his chest. Like Mohinder, he was suffering from pulmonary edema. Worse, they were caught in a chilling rain, and their radio signal was blocked by the gorge. Without the option of calling for a helicopter evacuation, the only way to save Gupta was to carry him back down to Lata.

They never had the time. Gupta's condition worsened with frightening speed. He closed his eyes, and his skin turned ashen. Within an hour, the good doctor was dead.

On 15 July, Flight Lieutenant Lalwani circled Gauchar once and then landed in a cloud of ochre dust. Stepping from the Mi-4, he stalked to the edge of the landing zone and paced to release a mix of nerves and sadness. From the rear of his Mi-4, jawans removed Gupta's tarpaulin-wrapped body. They had carried the corpse all the way to the Sanctuary helipad before calling Lalwani for a chopper extraction.

Bhangu and Wangyal watched the grim transfer from a nearby tent. They had arrived at Gauchar that morning after their hasty shopping spree in the capital. At Gauchar, too, was Dr. Tripathi (on emergency orders to replace the deceased Gupta), three more Sherpas (including their faithful cook, General Thondup), Sonam (despite his vulnerability to frostbite, sufficiently healed for light duties), and Deputy Inspector General B. N. Muttoo. A Kashmiri policeman on assignment to the paramilitary forces, Muttoo had been serving as deputy commander of the Chakrata-based Tibetan commando force. He was being temporarily diverted from the Tibetan project to act as the senior bureau representative in the Sanctuary, which would enable Kohli to eventually head back to New Delhi and coordinate U.S. participation in the search.

Within two days, a helicopter shuttle had transferred all personnel into the Sanctuary. From the helipad, they promptly marched to Base Camp, which Kohli's party had reestablished earlier in the week. Once there, Kohli wasted no time informing the newcomers that they would undertake a major sweep of Nanda Devi's southwestern face the next morning.

As planned, they departed at dawn. The team was large: ten Sherpas, Sisodia, Wangyal, Sonam, and Kohli. Bhangu was the only climber to remain behind. They could ill afford any repeat cases of altitude sickness, and he was tasked to look after Muttoo for the first couple of days.

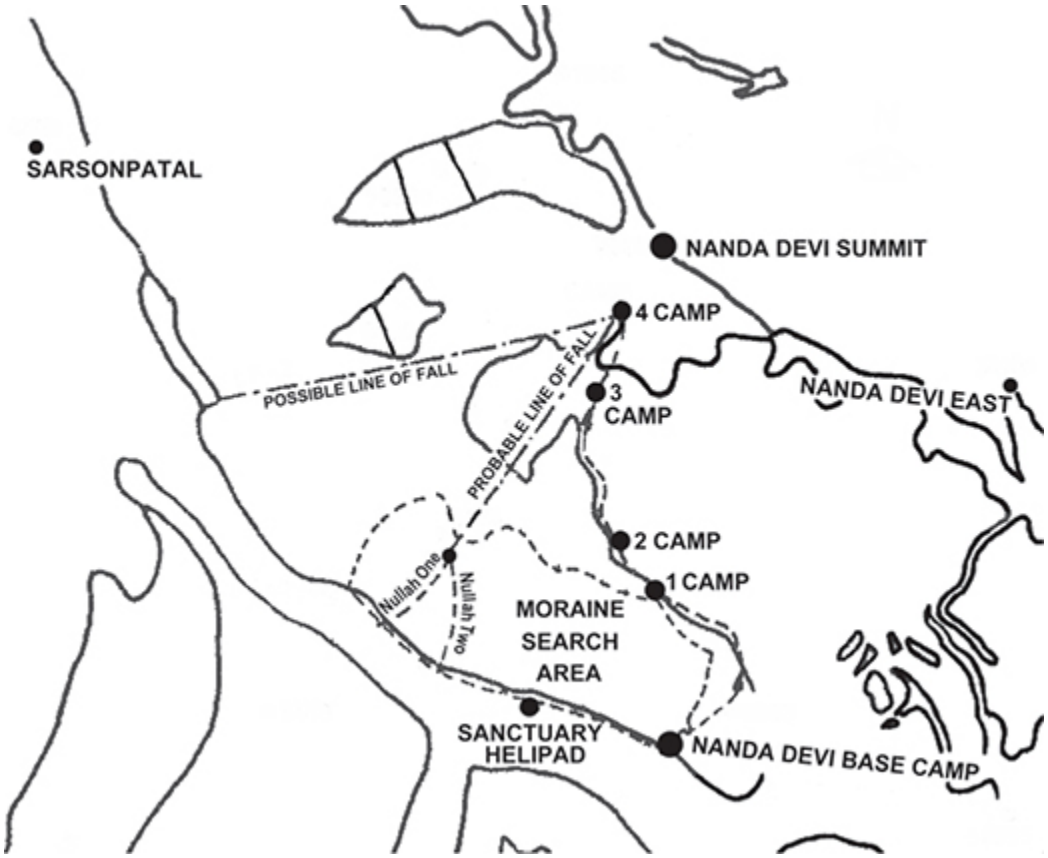
Back on the slopes last searched on 9 June, Kohli divided the men and directed them up to the snowfield. Over the intervening month, the summer sun had reduced the amount of powder to the faintest veneer. The resultant

meltwater channeled down from the shrinking field and through the nullahs in sepia-toned waterfalls, gouging an intricate latticework of tributaries and muddy sinks across the top of the glacier. Less a thing of beauty, the glacier was starting to resemble a blackened curbside snowbank in New York City.

For the rest of the afternoon, climbers and Sherpas made an exhaustive search of the high slope. Between the sharp angle of the southwestern face and the fact that the summer thaw had made the schist much more brittle, Nanda Devi had become an extremely fragile and delicate goddess. Every few steps, gravel and rocks would come loose and set off small avalanches, sending a shower of potentially deadly projectiles toward the mountaineers farther down the line.

Near nightfall, they rendezvoused on the glacier and walked back to Base Camp. At the camp periphery, Bhangu was waiting with an alpha counter. As he had been taught in June, he ran the meter over their clothing and rock samples. Nothing gave an abnormal reading.

After a rain delay of one day, the search party was back on the slope on 20 July. This time, Bhangu led three Sherpas to the point where the two nullahs originated at 18,000 feet. Although the precipitation had ceased, a thick fog had rolled in and reduced visibility to just fifteen yards. If they had any hope of spotting the device, they would have to nearly trip over it. Through noon, the team maneuvered across the top of the gullies. Bhangu and Tashi—the same pair that had summited Nanda Devi in June—then fixed themselves to a safety rope and rappelled into the mouth of the southern nullah (dubbed Nullah Two). They nearly paid with their lives. Hearing shouts from the remaining two Sherpas, they looked up in time to see a table-sized boulder ricocheting toward them. As they hugged the side of the gully and covered their heads, the rock exploded in a cloud of granite shards, one of which sliced across Tashi's rucksack. Though neither was hurt, they took this as their cue to call a halt to the day's effort and walk back to camp.



Nanda Devi showing likely lines of fall and the two nullahs leading to the moraine.

Over the next two days, summer rains put a damper on their search but did not prevent Lalwani from making regular Mi-4 shuttles into the Sanctuary. As Muttoo looked capable of tackling administrative matters, Kohli took a flight out on 21 July. He got to Gauchar just in time to begin coordinating U.S. participation in the recovery. Gordon Sleeper was already there and waiting for a chopper flight; this time, he was accompanied by an ARC technical understudy named H. S. Thakral.

By 22 July, Gordon had reached Base Camp. He was greeted by Wangyal, who handed over water and stone samples gathered at the nullahs earlier that day. These were passed under the alpha counter—again, nothing out of the ordinary registered—then whisked out in the Mi-4 for further testing in New Delhi.

Lalwani was back at the Sanctuary the following noon. Underscoring the importance of the search, aboard the flight were Mullik and Gougelmann. An impromptu mess tent was pitched at the side of the helipad, where the two guests were given a review of the operation to date. Gougelmann remained in a receptive mode, silently taking in the climbers' testimony. Mullik was more animated. Recounting details of his chopper flight from Gauchar, he noted that the gorge was extremely imposing from the air. Taking on a conciliatory tone, he said that it was now clear to him why so many porters had deserted last May. In a roundabout, face-saving way, this sounded like an apology for his ornery conduct over the previous weeks.

When Kohli heard about Mullik's mea culpa, he was still smarting from the intelligence chief's earlier words. He could not forgive him for launching their expedition without proper planning, and especially for insisting that the late doctor take part. For his own sense of closure, Kohli wrote a long and detailed letter to Mullik chronicling the glitches in the operation from the beginning. Without ARC director Kao to counsel him otherwise, he pulled no punches and heaped criticism on Mullik himself. Not knowing if he would still be on the mission after its receipt, Kohli couriered the letter back to New Delhi.

Upon reading Kohli's missive, Mullik offered no direct reply. Instead, he made copies of the letter and circulated it without deletions or edits among his senior colleagues in the capital. To Kohli, that spoke volumes.

After more than a week on the slope, those on the expedition were beginning to feel the fatigue. Though the altitude was not particularly high and the weather was relatively warm, the constant hiking across the rocks was taking a heavy toll on their mental and physical health. Part of the problem was the constant rain. Being the middle of summer, the seasonal monsoon pattern kept the Sanctuary under a steady drizzle that chilled the men to the bone. In some respects, this was even worse than being pelted by

snow. Part of the problem, too, was that the search was being conducted in a haphazard fashion. They were not organizing their efforts or following a neat plan, making it hard to keep track of what areas had already been covered. As a result, gauging their progress was all but impossible. Worse, the ranking official at Base Camp, Muttoo, was not a mountaineer and was issuing daily orders without fully appreciating how this translated on the ground.

A good example came on 25 July. That morning, Muttoo asked Bhangu and four Sherpas to start digging holes in the glacier near the base of northern nullah, dubbed Nullah One. When they questioned the utility of this idea, Muttoo persisted. Eventually doing as they were told—and thoroughly exhausting themselves in the process—they returned to camp only to have their feet tested for radioactivity. As might be expected, the comments about Muttoo were less than charitable.

On 30 July, Mullik paid his second visit to the Sanctuary. This time, he brought along M. M. L. Hooja, his intelligence protégé and ostensible successor as director general of security.[1] The two senior officers again lunched at an impromptu mess tent, where they made fast friends by producing a basket of mangoes and sweetbreads. Mullik continued with his conciliatory routine by heaping praise on Wangyal, who a couple days earlier had had a brush with death. He had been caught in the path of a granite shower when a rock the size of a baseball hit him square in the rucksack. Fortunately, the blow was largely absorbed by a glass bottle used to collect water samples.

That same day, Lalwani delivered Tom Frost and Rob Schaller to the Sanctuary. For Tom, it was a return engagement. Because the search was focused on some tough technical climbs up the rocky nullahs, it was hoped that his unparalleled talents honed in Yosemite would provide a critical edge. For Rob, this was his first trip to Nanda Devi since his medical evacuation the previous fall. Opinionated and articulate, Rob had impressed

Kohli during their brief exchanges in Anchorage, and he was happy to see that Rob now had a chance to reach the Sanctuary.

Not content with these two, the CIA had sought a third American climber for the search. Sandy Bill, the quiet but determined mountaineer who had done well on Nanda Devi last October, was an obvious choice. However, Sandy had grown sour over what he perceived as stifling bureaucracy during the 1965 mission and refused further participation in CIA climbs.[2] Lute Jerstad, another obvious choice, was too busy with school and family to take another sabbatical. On Lute's recommendation, the agency approached David Dingman, a twenty-nine-year-old medical doctor practicing in Baltimore. Dingman had been on the 1963 Everest team, and though he never reached the summit, he selflessly supported those who had. He was married with children, but he agreed to arrange for a month's leave to join the project.

While their three American friends spent the next few days getting acclimatized, the Indian members and Sherpas forged ahead with further sweeps. As if to remind them that nature is always the boss, five inches of unseasonable snow buried the lower slopes of Nanda Devi on the afternoon of 1 August, just as three search parties had maneuvered to the top of Nullah One. Not expecting the storm, they were wearing normal hiking boots. Not only were their toes frozen, but the combination of slippery snow and loose gravel offered no sure footing. Unable to focus on the search for the device, they gingerly made their way back to Base Camp to wait out the bad weather.

Mullik had many attributes, but patience was not among them. Hearing of the weather delay, he leaned on Muttoo to restart the search. Muttoo, who perhaps had come to a different understanding of the challenges posed by snow after working with the Tibetans, browbeat the climbers into getting back on the slope after a twenty-four-hour hold.

Bhangu, Wangyal, and three Sherpas hiked to the snow line, where, to their dismay, they found that the accumulation of powder had increased to eight inches. They stayed for just half an hour, dodging frequent rock and ice avalanches. After that, they divided into two groups and moved to the edge of Nullah One. Because the sudden cold weather had somewhat reduced the amount of meltwater sluicing through the gully, Wangyal and two of the Sherpas fixed ropes and disappeared into the rocky abyss. The descent was harrowing. Face with a chilling mist, slippery rocks, and the constant danger of rocks falling from above, they could focus only a fraction of their attention on searching the crevices for signs of telltale metal. From above, Bhangu briefly caught sight of Wangyal maneuvering over a rocky bump. He yelled to his companion below, but though they were separated by only a few hundred feet, the rumble of water channeling down the gully drowned out his words.

That night, Thakral, the ARC scientist, met the searchers at the Base Camp perimeter and swept them with an alpha counter. It showed nothing out of the ordinary.

By that point, motivation among the climbers was plummeting fast. Muttoo was driving them hard and showing no appreciation for the amount of energy it took to scour the slope. There was also the earlier complaint that their search was too unorganized, with no sense of how far they had progressed and how far they had to go.

Now that the American climbers were set to join them on the southwestern face, Bill McKniff would be returning to India to provide on-site CIA direction. Heading down to the Sanctuary helipad to greet him, Sonam left Base Camp on the morning of 4 August. A proud man, Sonam was hurting but would not admit it. His previous frostbite made him especially susceptible to the cold. Though the weather was relatively mild, he was in a fair bit of pain. And though he was still in fantastic shape for a

man his age, his forty-three years were starting to show. These factors probably played a role in the events that followed.

Gathering at the Base Camp that noon, the Indians, Americans, and Sherpas listened to Sonam's tale. While hiking to the helipad to fetch Bill, Sonam had looked toward the low ridge to the north and had seen what he believed to be a man with Mongolian features. As all participants in the expedition were accounted for, the interloper could not have been one of them. Sonam had a ready answer: he must have seen a Chinese spy, possibly armed. Intuitively, Sonam's audience questioned his theory. Even if the Chinese had somehow gotten wise to their mission, it was a stretch to think that they had been able to infiltrate somebody into the Sanctuary. Kohli, who was being kept up-to-date by radio reports sent by Dayalu, recalled Wangyal's yeti sighting of the previous year and thought that Sonam had probably seen another bear.

Sonam was not so easily dissuaded. Insisting that his report was accurate, he demanded that the spy be tracked down and captured. This did not sit well with the Indians at Base Camp. Bhangu, whose history with Sonam was rocky, derided the sighting as an unnecessary distraction. He also thought it ludicrous to pursue a suspect who was possibly armed without having any weapons themselves. The three American climbers were slightly more diplomatic. Looking for an excuse to scale some modest slopes before tackling the nullahs, they agreed to comb the hills for the rest of the day looking for Sonam's suspect. As might be expected, they found nothing.

Sonam was still not satisfied. On 5 August, he pressured them to look a second time. Together with the Indian climbers and Sherpas, the mountaineers spent the morning hunting for the phantom spy. Not surprisingly, they came back that afternoon thoroughly exhausted but without sighting any large mammals, human or otherwise.

As the climbers entered the mess tent, they found Sonam midway through lunch. Sharing the meal with him were Muttoo and Dr. Tripathi. On account of his uncompromising attitude, Muttoo was not the most popular person in camp. The doctor, too, had come under criticism the previous week during a visit by Mullik. Focusing on their VIP guest, the doctor had ignored General Thondup, who was nearly unconscious in his tent from a high fever and infected leg. It was Rob Schaller, having arrived just hours earlier, who eventually administered an injection to their ailing cook. The sight of those three feasting while they searched for something out of Sonam's imagination was too much for the climbers, and the tension was palpable. Slowly, uncomfortably, the situation was edging closer to a mutiny.

1. Viewed as an extremely diplomatic, measured personality by his peers, Hooja had been a loyal deputy to Mullik since the latter's days as director of the Intelligence Bureau. Mullik had wanted Hooja to succeed him as intelligence director, but this would have entailed leapfrogging over the more senior Balbir Singh. Instead, Mullik maneuvered to have Hooja assume the post of director general of security in July 1966 (even though Mullik retained considerable influence over the paramilitary projects). In 1968, Mullik was finally successful in having Hooja elevated to intelligence director.

2. Bill interview.

CHAPTER NINE

Moraine Camp

In 1966, the U.S. Air Force had nearly a dozen air rescue helicopter detachments scattered throughout Europe. Designated primarily for emergency contingencies around their respective air bases, these units were equipped with the HH-43B Huskie. In the world of rotary-wing aircraft, the Huskie was the antithesis of aerodynamic beauty. It had twin intermeshing rotors positioned overhead, a truncated tail, four stubby struts, and a box-shaped cabin. Plus, it had almost no range; for long-distance rescues, the crew had to carry gas drums from the cargo sling and pump them by hand through a chamois filter. But this ungainly steed did have one significant attribute: it performed rather well in high-altitude conditions. This is what appealed to the CIA, which in midsummer forwarded an appeal for the loan of a pair.

Processing the request, the Pentagon quietly cut classified orders for a single U.S. Air Force mechanic, Staff Sergeant Anthony Valenzuela, to leave his posting at Moron Air Base, Spain, for a temporary assignment at Laon Air Base near Paris, France. At that time, Laon was in the process of being closed down, and base officials were told to prepare a pair of Huskies for a classified mission. Valenzuela's job was to strip them of all nonessential items and install oxygen equipment. It took him a week to remove the back seats, rear clamshell doors, and any other amenity not vital for flight. Lightened as a result, the Huskies' ability to fly at high altitudes was theoretically enhanced.

Both modified choppers were then loaded into a C-124 Globemaster cargo plane and rushed west across the Atlantic. After meeting up with a crew that put them through a pro forma flight test, they were put back in a plane and shipped to New Delhi. The first week of August, the choppers

were flown north on a final leg to a dusty riverside airstrip. Flight Lieutenant Suri, one of the ARC pilots flying the Mi-4, stepped forward and extended a hand. “Welcome to Gauchar.”

The arrival of the two Huskies was only one indication that the United States was getting more serious about the recovery effort. Also arriving at Gauchar was Dr. Bill Brewer, another nuclear expert from the Atomic Energy Commission, who had brought along two pieces of equipment to aid in the search. One was a standard metal detector meant to locate pieces of the metal casing hidden under the ice, snow, or soil. The other was a portable neutron counter. One of the characteristics of the nuclear fuel in the generator was the emission of neutrons due to spontaneous fission. Similar in appearance to the alpha counter already in use since June, the neutron counter was capable of detecting neutrons at a depth of one foot of solid ice or ten feet of loose snow.[1]

Brewer flew into the Sanctuary with this gear just as the climbers were shifting out of their Base Camp. To cut down on the long daily hikes to and from the southwest face, it had been decided to establish a second camp on the glacier itself. Selection of a suitable site had been delayed a few days due to Sonam’s spy chase. Not until 7 August were tents pitched at the new locale, dubbed the Moraine Camp. Three days later, the search recommenced from this forward position.

Now just twenty-five minutes from the base of the mountain, all available hands were at the foot of the slope by daybreak. Even Gordon, accompanied by a Sherpa, was looking forward to climbing the lower reaches of Nullah Two to take readings with the neutron counter. Most of the other climbers gravitated toward Nullah One. By that point in summer, this gully had become a serious technical challenge. At the very bottom was a fifteen-foot waterfall, its walls slick and concave. Above that, a rocky channel—replete with overhangs, walls, and more watery cascades—disappeared into a layer of low-lying clouds. In short, it was a

mountaineer's paradise. Only the granite rubble at the base, and the constant rumble of avalanching above, offered stark reminders that the Blessed Goddess had a deadly streak.

Wangyal, always one to test his limits, was the first to begin weaving his way up. After barely passing the bottom waterfall, however, he stopped. The boulders were simply too big, too steep, and too slippery. Drenched and humbled, he did not like the odds and descended. Tom, in his element, tried next. But outfitted for an alpine hike, he was ill equipped to showcase his gravity-defying tricks perfected in Yosemite. Barely making any progress, he too came down. Though these top-ranked mountaineers had been bested, they were hardly frustrated. With the prospect of immersing themselves in a serious rock climb, the mission was suddenly more sport than work. Morale started to rise.

There was another reason for their improved spirits. On 12 August, Brewer unveiled a comprehensive search plan that allowed the climbers to clearly chart their progress. No longer would they be exhausting themselves according to an ad hoc script. Perhaps not by coincidence, Muttoo, who had been directing the earlier effort, had temporarily returned to New Delhi on sick leave.

Reaching the bottom of Nullah Two that morning, they divided into teams. Gordon, Wangyal, and Bhangu took a metal detector and worked their way across the ice and granite rubble at its base. After a morning of sweeps, they reviewed their catch: twelve empty juice cans, several can covers, one mug, and six tent pegs. They had also found over two dozen rocks that had minor metallic content. None of this could be linked to the missing generator.

At the same time, Bill and Rob took the neutron counter and started working the same area. The target generator, said Bill, would emit about 1,000 neutrons per minute. The counter, however, consistently registered

just 105 per minute. As they moved across the glacier, finished grids were marked off with red tape.

By noon, it had started to rain. Despite the inclement weather and inconclusive search results, the climbers felt a sense of accomplishment. Rather than the repetitive and often haphazard effort during previous weeks, they were now following a systematic plan. The Indians and Americans were actually starting to enjoy themselves.

Their newfound cheer, it turned out, would be short-lived. By 15 August, the climbers had completed their initial search of the glacier near the nullahs. No trace of debris or unusual radioactivity had been found, but Gordon was not satisfied and requested that they start over. Unfortunately, dysentery was making the rounds and had put Wangyal out of commission temporarily. Worse, the Sherpas had staged a work slowdown at the Moraine Camp because they did not want to perform menial tasks such as cooking. In no mood to suffer their antics, Bhangu sent them packing back to Base Camp and requested that ITBP jawans take their place.

Before the mood could deteriorate further, Brewer had a brainstorm. Rather than continuing to hypothesize where the device might have fallen, he proposed throwing a mockup from Camp Four to see where it would land. Improvising, he figured that a half-empty butane canister could roughly double as the generator. Instead of sending a climbing team all the way up to Camp Four, he sent a request to fly there in a helicopter.

Such a mission was tailor-made for the modified Huskies. Ever since arriving earlier in the month, the U.S. Air Force contingent has been idly counting the days at Gauchar. Befriending their ARC counterparts, they had swapped copilots on practice flights—the Americans going aboard the Soviet Mi-4, and the Indians taking a seat in a Huskie. It was a kind of neutral Switzerland among aviators, the Cold War competition among superpowers on hold as they shared U.S. and communist bloc hardware on

Indian soil. By night, both sets of crews would sip scotch and rum at riverside.

On 16 August, the American aviators took leave of their serene setting with orders to fly a maiden mission into the Sanctuary. Landing a Huskie on the moraine that afternoon, they took aboard Bill Brewer and a dozen butane canisters. Adding power, the pilot wove higher in the thin air until the chopper was straining at 22,500 feet. Bundled against the cold and breathing from an oxygen bottle, Bill positioned himself near the void where the rear clamshell doors had been removed. As the Huskie moved close to Nanda Devi, he spotted the small platform that had held Camp Four. Delicately, the pilot edged the Huskie over the site. It took all his concentration to keep the helicopter steady in the strong mountain wind. When they were directly over the missing shelf that had once sheltered the device, Bill immediately began tossing butane canisters. They bounced down the steep, icy slope and disappeared into the mist toward the nullahs and glacier below.

The next day, 17 August, the search for the canisters commenced. Bhangu and three jawans hiked up to the snow line in an attempt to descend Nullah Two, while Gordon and another jawan intended to do the same at Nullah One. As had been the case all summer, avalanching was a constant hazard. One of the jawans with Bhangu had a close call as he dodged a boulder; after that, he lost heart and insisted on returning to the glacier. Gordon was more successful, working his way down Nullah One until he chanced upon two canisters lodged in the rocks.

Gathering that night with Bill Brewer, the climbers reviewed their findings. Although ten of the canisters were never located, the two discovered in Nullah One pointed to that being the more likely path of fall. Focusing along that route, Bill wanted to check whether the generator had somehow reached the glacier at the base of Nullah One and, due to its heat, sunk far below the surface. Because the metal detector and neutron counter

could not reach deep into the glacier, he wanted to dig to the meltwater flowing under its surface to test for contamination.

This was easier said than done. Armed with shovels, four jawans went to the base of Nullah One and began digging a pit in the moraine. Eight feet down, they were still finding only soil and ice—no water. The next day, the climbers returned to excavate a new pit. Twelve feet down, there was still no water. Another twelve-foot pit was made, but again no flowing water was found.

By 19 August, the climbers and technical experts were fast running out of ideas. Digging holes in the glacier was both exhausting and unproductive. Searching in the nullahs, meanwhile, had become prohibitively dangerous due to frequent avalanching. On the remote chance that the debris had been exposed under the summer sun, a Huskie returned to the Sanctuary to let the climbers scan the snow line from the air.

Despite all this, the device remained as elusive as ever. Although there were still a few more weeks of climbing weather ahead, the Indian members were growing fatigued after more than a month of intense activity. On 20 August, Wangyal departed on an Mi-4 for a much-deserved rest. Bhangu followed a day later.

As the roster grew thinner at the Moraine Camp, Tom and Rob took the lead in repeatedly venturing back to the base of the nullahs during late August and the first week of September. But they, too, were growing bored with the search and lobbied for a change. Because no U.S. mountaineers had yet ventured to the collapsed shelf at Camp Four, they seized on this opportunity and volunteered to take another look. Though this was a fairly transparent ploy to flex their climbing skills, nothing else was showing much promise, so their proposal was approved.

The two enjoyed relatively warm temperatures and only the faintest traces of ice as they leapfrogged up to Camp Three in good time. Leaving behind a small contingent of Sherpas that had helped haul food, the pair

continued alone toward Camp Four and arrived shortly before noon. Rob, designated the unofficial photographer of the expedition, began chronicling the scene with several rolls of film. Although their assigned task was accomplished, Rob was not ready to go down yet. Casting an eye toward the summit, he steeled himself to go higher. Tom, who was perhaps the most patriotic of the U.S. bunch and never failed to remind the others that they were on an important mission, wanted no part of extracurricular climbing activity. In addition, the altitude was taking its toll, and he had reached his limit at Camp Four. Without saying a word, he crawled inside the remnants of the camp's tent to await Rob's return.

Just as Bhangu and Tashi had done in June, Rob slowly curled his way through the rock fields above Camp Four. Making fast progress in the clear weather, he finally came upon the steep, fragile face that stood between him and the summit. He fixed crampons to his boots and began the delicate ascent. He had made little progress when the schist crumbled under his weight and he fell backward. "At that point I wondered to myself what I was doing there," Rob later recalled. "It occurred to me that I couldn't make it."[2]

His chest heaving in the thin air, Rob sat to clear his head and ponder his next move. Looking for a better approach, he crabbed clockwise around the peak before happening across a path of hard snow that had escaped the brunt of the summer sun. From this vantage point, the snow appeared to extend to the summit. On this route, Rob's crampons bit deep into the icy surface. After a draining half hour, the slope ended, and he was standing atop Nanda Devi. Temples pounding, Rob took out his camera and held it reversed at arm's length, snapping a roll of self-portraits to document his feat. Then he took out a single carabiner and pounded it into the rock. "It was a very personal moment," he said, "but I was completely wiped out."[3]

By the time Rob returned to Camp Four, it was nearly sundown. He did not tell Tom what he had done, nor was he asked. His climb was one for

the record books: the highest solo by an American mountaineer to that date. But the effort had taken a heavy toll. He had already dropped nearly thirty pounds over the previous month, and the added strain of his ascent to the summit left him shaking and breathless. Worse, his eyesight had been seriously reduced due to oxygen deprivation. With no peripheral vision, he felt like he was peering through two toilet paper rolls. And because of hypoxia or glare from the sun, or a combination of both, he was having trouble discerning color.

In that state, Rob needed to get down from the mountain—fast. But with impaired vision, trying to negotiate the narrow ridge below Camp Four would have been suicidal. Realizing that he would need to act as guide and anchor, Tom fixed a short tether between them, and they set off down the slope. Reduced to nearly a crawl, they had barely made any headway when the Blessed Goddess began to rumble from above. They pressed themselves against the mountainside and braced for the worst. Seconds later, the first boulders flew past their position. For what seemed like an eternity, a granite shower poured down from the vicinity of Camp Four. Geography was to prove their savior, as the bulk of the rocks rolled off the sheer sides to their left and right. Aside from being engulfed in a cloud of dust, both Americans escaped the avalanche unscathed.

The remainder of the descent was uneventful. By the time they reached Base Camp, Rob's eyesight was fast returning to normal, and his spirits were soaring. He had already taken the Sherpas into his confidence, and they spread the word of his climb among their colleagues at camp. In short order, Muttoo (back from sick leave) heard the news. Just as Rawat had counseled in June, Muttoo was concerned that senior officials in New Delhi would take a dim view of Rob's unauthorized ascent. Electing to commit a sin of omission, he directed that it be unreported in Dayalu's daily radio dispatches back to the capital.

Rob's solo summit ascent provided an upbeat end to an otherwise disappointing expedition. By late September, after almost four months in the Sanctuary, not even the faintest trace of the sensor had been found among 271 samples taken from the nullahs and the glacier. With the snowfall increasing in frequency and intensity, a halt was called at month's end. In a familiar refrain, the mountaineers packed up all trace of their camps and hauled the equipment to the helipad.

As the Americans waited to take an Mi-4 out of the Sanctuary, Bill McKniff approached Rob. The two had gotten along famously during their occasional encounters at Base Camp, and Rob considered the CIA case officer his confidant. Noticing that Rob had kept copious notes of the mission in a climbing diary, Bill asked if he could borrow the document to help prepare a detailed report of the expedition for headquarters. Rob agreed without hesitation. Back in New Delhi, preparing for the trip back to the United States, Rob encountered Bill one last time and asked for his diary back.

"Can't do that," said Bill. Instead, he offered to provide a heavily censored version that contained only general remarks about traveling into the Sanctuary.

Feeling betrayed, Rob declined the offer and jetted home. Tucked into his luggage was the only proof of the summer's events: the roll of film he had shot on the summit of Nanda Devi.

Rob was on his way home to Seattle when the remote Xinjiang desert shook for the second time that year. On 27 October, a twenty-kiloton bomb impacted the sand and sent shock waves picked up at monitoring stations around the world. Though just one-tenth the size of the device detonated in May, this one caused exceptional concern in New Delhi and Washington. Rather than being set off on a platform or dropped from an aircraft, this bomb was the first to be fixed atop a single-stage intermediate-range missile. Known as the Dong Feng (East Wind) 2, this rocket had an

estimated range of 1,643 miles—putting dozens of cities in the subcontinent and northeastern Asia within range of a Chinese first strike.

With its tendency for ham-fisted propaganda, the Chinese state media were not modest about the launch. “China’s millions are hailing it as a great victory for the invincible thought of Mao Tse-tung,” said one proclamation the day after the launch. The People’s Daily issued a million copies of a one-page extra announcing the news.[4]

As if to add insult to injury, Beijing conducted an encore detonation two months later. This one was exploded on a platform—not a missile—but the fact that it was the third of the year and packed some 300 kilotons (50 percent larger than the May explosion) was another reason for concern among American and Indian policy makers. People’s Liberation troops beat drums and triumphantly sang “The East Is Red,” chimed one Chinese news release.[5]

And the climbers were still no closer to having a sensor in the Himalayas.

1. Kohn claimed that in 1966 the CIA devised and implemented an ingenious solution to find the lost device. Piecing together several lengths of rubber hose, said Kohn, the expedition members were able to put the intake near a mountain stream and then divert water to wash away snowy debris at the base of Nanda Devi in order to uncover the generator (“Nanda Devi Caper,” p. 28). This tale is completely fanciful.

2. Schaller interview.

3. Ibid.

4. FBIS, East Asia, 28 October 1966, pp. CCC1–CCC2.

5. Ibid., 30 December 1966, p. CCC1.

CHAPTER TEN

Nanda Kot

Throughout the winter of 1966–1967, representatives from the CIA and Intelligence Bureau debated their future course of action. Among them was a handful of conspiracy theorists in the CIA—senior officials, in fact—who believed that the device was not missing at all. They were of the opinion that the generator had actually been recovered in June 1966 by the all-Indian team and that the nuclear fuel had been removed for use in India's own nuclear weapons program.[1]

The majority from both sides, however, believed that the greatest danger was remaining blind to China's fast-developing missile program. On 15 March 1967, they formally approved an immediate expedition to Nanda Kot. The search for the original generator could be resumed at a later date.

Once again, Kohli was chosen as joint team leader. Both governments were keen to have the sensor in place before the summer monsoons caused weather delays, meaning that planning had to be completed in about a month. Despite this short time frame for preparation, Kohli was fairly confident of their chances for success. Nanda Kot had been his first major Himalayan climb back in 1959, and the details of that expedition—and the idiosyncrasies of the mountain's upper reaches—were seared in his memory. Though he was not about to underestimate the challenges of climbing 22,000 feet, he knew that the peak's so-called Dome—the expansive icy bulge about 500 feet short of the top—was a far more reasonable target than Nanda Devi's summit.

His first order of business was to select a team. After the trials and tribulations of 1966, they decided to err on the side of caution by sending a rather large number of U.S. and Indian mountaineers. The CIA was in charge of arranging the American participants, so Kohli focused on his

countrymen. Keeping his selection to those who had already been exposed to the project, he picked the top-ranked veterans Rawat, Bhangu, and Wangyal. Among the list of second-tier climbers were Wangyal II and Sisodia. There would also be a dozen of their best climbing Sherpas to assist on the slopes. Captain B. S. Shetty of the Indian army would be the team physician, and Gyan Singh, a Punjabi police officer on assignment to the ITBP, was to be their radio officer.

As usual, Rawat and Bhangu did their magic around New Delhi to secure the requisite supplies and organize the loads. They were scheduled to depart around 24 April, which was sufficiently early in the season to allow them time to scale the mountain and assemble the device before the summer monsoons grew fierce.

On the march toward Nanda Kot, early May 1967. ITBP radio operator Gyan Singh is on the right.

Three days before they were to leave the capital, Kohli got an unexpected visitor. Sonam arrived at his office and declared—demanded, actually—his intention to join the expedition. He had his customary spark in his eyes and was exuding vintage enthusiasm, but Kohli could almost

feel the aches in his body. Most top mountaineers have a relatively short window of opportunity before health considerations put the higher peaks off-limits. Between his age and his earlier bout with frostbite, Sonam was past his prime, but he was a proud and stubborn man who had no intention of quitting. With some reservations, Kohli penciled him onto the mission roster.

Back at CIA headquarters, a search had commenced for a new case officer to manage the operation on the American side. After two years in the role, Bill McKniff had been shifted to a new assignment in East Asia. The whole Nanda Devi experience had not enhanced his career. Unfairly, he took some personal and professional heat for the failure to reach the summit in 1965 and the lack of success in finding the missing generator in 1966.[2]

Taking his place would be forty-three-year-old Sam Currie. Born Beach Miller (Beach was the name of a Civil War general, relatives claimed without basis), he had been orphaned as a baby and adopted locally in Shawnee, Oklahoma. He joined the U.S. Navy as an aviation cadet in 1942 and flew combat missions off carriers during World War II. Returning to the University of Oklahoma after the war, he earned a degree in aviation administration. He was recalled to service as an air intelligence officer during the Korean conflict, and in late 1951, Currie joined the CIA. Because of his flight background, between 1955 and 1958 he served as chief of the agency's Air Training Branch. Located at the CIA's Camp Peary training facility in Virginia, the branch, among other things, offered a four-week primer designed to familiarize case officers with the various facets of covert air operations.

During that same period, Currie enrolled in the four-month class for prospective case officers. Learning the basics of recruitment, agent handling, and tradecraft, he became a blend of both instructor and field operative and found himself deployed around the world on short stints to train indigenous agents in a variety of espionage topics. During one such

assignment in 1960, he was in Manila to tutor a pair of prospective Filipino sources in communications and reporting. While there, he was invited to the home of the CIA station chief, John “Jocko” Richardson. Currie apparently made a good impression, because two years later, when Richardson had taken over as station chief in Saigon, Currie was called to South Vietnam for a year-long posting. After returning to the United States, he resumed his duties at Camp Peary as a senior instructor. Currie also kept his pilot’s license current and often found an excuse to fly the small inventory of aircraft the agency kept at Peary.

Coincidentally, Currie and Richardson crossed paths again. After a hurried exit from South Vietnam in late 1963 (Ngo Dinh Diem was assassinated in November, and the CIA station chief was deemed too closely linked to the fallen prime minister), Richardson returned to headquarters and was eventually reassigned as director of the Office of Training. This put Camp Peary under his purview, making him Currie’s boss. In early 1967, Richardson set out on an inspection tour of CIA paramilitary training being conducted across Virginia. From Peary, he was planning to head to Fort A. P. Hill in the northern part of the state. Currie stepped forward and volunteered to fly him there in an L-20 Beaver. In true U.S. Navy fashion, he made the final approach nearly at stalling speed and slapped the tail down in a perfect carrier-type landing. “Jocko said he liked my style,” recalled Currie.

Barely a month later, Currie was beckoned to Washington for an audience with his boss. The Nanda Kot assignment had come past his desk, and he was looking for a case officer willing to go on a climb for a few months. “If I was a bit younger,” Richardson admitted with a shy grin, “this is the kind of job I would grab.” He did not have to ask twice. Currie took the assignment.

Exactly as planned, the expedition’s supplies left New Delhi on 25 April. Sonam and Kohli departed in a jeep the following day. En route,

Kohli stopped at the historic Sikh temple of Sis Gunj to offer ardaas, the special Sikh form of invocation. Back in 1959, he had visited the same temple and recited the same incantations before his first expedition to Nanda Kot. It had seemed to work that time, and he sincerely hoped that it would again.

Unlike the drive to Nanda Devi, which was in a northerly direction toward the entrance to the Sanctuary, the journey to Nanda Kot was generally east from the capital. That evening, they reached the city of Haldwani and spent the night at a resident ITBP camp, where they linked up with Sisodia and Wangyal. Wangyal II, they learned, had received word of a death in his family and had rushed back to Ladakh; he would join them later.

The four of them veered north the next day before reaching the town of Bageshwar. They then turned east again, and twenty-four hours later they were at Tejam, a dusty hill town at the terminus of the road leading north toward Nanda Kot. Tejam was notable for a couple of things. Two years earlier, CIA technician Gordon Sleeper had surveyed the area and established the relay station for the sensor atop a ridge at the nearby town of Sandev. Tejam was also host to a small field camp for the Tibetan commando force led by General Uban.

Much had happened to that force since its founding in 1962. With the help of American financial aid and an initial contingent of CIA advisers, the Tibetan unit—known as Establishment 22, in honor of Uban's earlier posting with the Twenty-second Artillery Regiment—had met its 5,000-man quota and been airborne qualified in the summer of 1963. Its members were organized into 122-man companies, which were grouped into battalions. In theory, they would parachute onto the Tibetan plateau and strike at the Chinese rear in the event of renewed Sino-Indian hostilities along the Himalayas.

Pleased with the results to date, the Intelligence Bureau and CIA initiated plans in 1966 to double the size of Establishment 22. With this increase came greater bureaucracy. General Uban, for example, came down from Chakrata and was given an office in New Delhi. In addition, that December, Establishment 22 was given a new, equally ambiguous cover designation: the Special Frontier Force (SFF).[3] To support the SFF's mission, a number of bases were established around the country. For operations in the western part of the country, as well as for airborne training, it staged from a special air base built at Sarsawa, eighty-two miles south of its headquarters at Chakrata. For missions along the eastern border, the commandos staged from a smaller airfield built near the Burmese frontier outside the village of Doomdoomah. There was also a series of field camps dotted around the nation, including the one at Tejam.

For the Nanda Kot mission, the Intelligence Bureau had arranged for the SFF to extend logistical support. It was to provide porters from its ranks, as well as beasts of burden. Within the Indian paramilitary community, the SFF had quietly earned a reputation as a determined, often ferocious, unit. When twenty Tibetans turned out the next morning, however, Kohli was a bit taken back. In contrast to the relatively spit-and-polished jawans from the ITBP, these commandos had an earthy, primitive aura. Most had inadequate footwear, including a few with sandals, but this lack was more than offset by their focused, serious demeanor. With little exaggeration, they looked like they were spoiling for a war. And each of the twenty Tibetans had a pony in tow.

Looking over this number, Kohli was not satisfied. The route to Nanda Kot was a straight shot north over unimproved trails with several small towns along the way. Although it was infinitely easier than the hike into the Sanctuary, he thought they needed another twenty porters to allow for attrition. Scrambling to meet this request, the cooperative SFF camp commander had them assembled in a few hours.

They still had another day before departing Tejam. The village happened to be near Rawat's hometown, where, coincidentally, a relative of his was getting married. Over the course of the afternoon, they watched the elaborate wedding ceremony, including a spectacular display of traditional swordsmanship.

Meanwhile, Wangyal II had joined them after attending his relative's funeral in Ladakh, and that night, the entire complement of Indian climbers huddled to discuss strategy. They decided that the SFF porters would ferry loads all the way up to the Advance Base Camp at the 15,000-foot level on the side of Nanda Kot. After stocking that locale, just six of the Tibetans would be retained for porter work. They estimated that they would need another three camps up the slope to reach the Dome.

The next morning, they departed as scheduled. From the 1959 expedition, Kohli was fairly familiar with the route beyond Tejam. But unlike that occasion, they now had Rawat on their team. This meant that at each of the three small towns along the way, dozens of his relatives and friends turned out along the trail. Invariably, they plied the climbers with delicious fresh meals. This contrasted sharply with the exhausting slog from Joshimath, and they were spoiled by the favored treatment.

As they passed through the final town, Kohli felt it imperative that they visit the local temple dedicated to Nanda Devi. Despite their varied religions—Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist—they all prayed to the gods for success and asked them not to demand any sacrifices from among their number.

The gods did not seem to be listening, however. On 3 May, their path was obscured by a heavy snowfall. Plodding along a narrow trail dug into a steep slope, Kohli fell midway back along their column and, looking ahead, saw one of the Tibetans coaxing half a dozen ponies. Suddenly, a cloud of white powder shot up in front of the Tibetan. Where the six ponies had been there was suddenly a void. Part of the trail had given way, sending the animals tumbling down the slope. They peered over the edge and saw a

heart-wrenching sight. The ponies were in a bloody heap, their spindly legs twisted at unnatural angles. Several were barely alive, emitting human-like cries. Half the Tibetans fixed lines and rappelled down to retrieve their supplies. The journey was not starting off particularly well.

Marching faster to make up for lost time, they arrived at the foot of Nanda Kot two days later. After considering several sites, Kohli chose a position at the 13,000-foot level to act as their Base Camp. Tents were up and General Thondup had his kitchen working in no time.

In a significant improvement over the arrangement at Nanda Devi, they planned to clear a helipad adjacent to Base Camp. Staging from an airfield near the city of Haldwani, ARC choppers were scheduled to bring them regular supplies of fresh vegetables and other perishables. They searched the nearby fields for a suitable landing zone and ultimately settled on a slightly elevated shelf that allowed for drainage off the edges. Unfortunately, it was cluttered with granite rocks and boulders that needed to be cleared. For four days, they lifted away all but the heaviest boulders. It was at that point that they witnessed the amazing physical prowess of the SFF commandos. While one of the Tibetans bent over, half a dozen of his colleagues picked up a 440-pound boulder and placed it on his back. With short, steady steps, he moved it fifty yards. “I decided at that point,” said Kohli, “that I would not like to be on the receiving end of their tender mercies.”

While they had been making their way to the base of Nanda Kot, Sam Currie had been busy in the United States assembling the American climbing contingent. Finding volunteers was more difficult than in previous years. Unlike the climbers from India, who were government employees, the CIA was hiring civilians on temporary contracts. Each American mountaineer was promised a monthly stipend of $1,000 for the duration of the mission. This entailed taking leave from regular paying jobs and, in the case of doctors like Rob Schaller and David Dingman, forfeiting much

better pay as medical professionals. “There was a definite element of patriotism in accepting the job,” said Currie. “There was also a lot of ‘because it’s there’ emotions common among mountaineers.”[4]

Casting its net for prospects, the CIA was quick to sign up Tom Frost for his third trip in as many years. Rob Schaller, too, agreed to a reprise. Turning them down was Lute Jerstad, who was too busy with work to make the sacrifice, and Dingman, who could not take time off from his medical practice.

For the last two climbers, the agency networked among veterans of the 1963 Everest expedition. The first to accept the offer was Barry Prather. A tough-looking aeronautical engineer, Barry had spent much of the Everest expedition drilling holes in the surrounding glaciers to observe the movement of ice. Standing six feet tall and weighing 210 pounds, he had justly earned the nickname “Bear,” which the Everest Sherpas had translated into their own lexicon, “Balu.” He was still going by the latter nickname in 1967.

A second Everest veteran to volunteer was James “Barry” Corbet. A geology major from Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, Barry had acted in support of the 1963 Everest party that went up West Ridge. An accomplished outdoor photographer, he had just finished filming a breathtaking promotional film for United Airlines titled “Yoo-hoo, I Can Fly.”

Once the four picks had been finalized, the climbers and Currie flew to a restricted airfield on the remote Harvey Point peninsula near Elizabeth City, North Carolina. Unlike better-known Camp Peary—the main CIA training facility in the Virginia countryside—Harvey Point was a highly classified agency base reserved for paramilitary combat exercises. Established during World War II as a post for dirigibles patrolling the Atlantic coast on the lookout for Nazi submarines, the site offered

extensive, isolated facilities for a variety of weapons and demolitions courses.

The use of demolitions, in fact, was one of the reasons the climbers were there. During the Alaska prelude to the Nanda Devi mission, several of the original mountaineers in the program, including Tom, had been given a primer in the use of explosives in the event they needed to blast a shelf for the device. As it turned out, this skill had not come into play. But just in case the climbers needed to clear a platform on Nanda Kot, the CIA instructors at Harvey Point gave them pointers on detonating a range of charges. The climbers were also introduced (or, in the case of Tom and Rob, reintroduced) to the sensor, minus the nuclear generator, and were tutored in assembling its component parts.

Kohli and Barry Corbet (right) on Nanda Kot.

On 6 May, Currie and his mountaineers boarded one of the biweekly Pan Am flights to New Delhi. Arriving at Palam airport, they were met on

the tarmac by Tucker Gougelmann and rushed to a safe house. Currie carried bogus identification for a Seattle-based front company called Inter-Ocean Aviation. Because he would not be under diplomatic cover, the ARC had insisted that he use fake credentials. If anybody wanted to check his bona fides, the CIA had arranged for a lawyer on its payroll to answer an Inter-Ocean telephone number in Seattle. At the safe house, the climbers waited while the Indian team finished clearing the helipad near Nanda Kot. While his three compatriots grew stir crazy, Tom spent most of his time calmly immersed in the Book of Mormon.

Finally, on 10 May, they received instructions from New Delhi to join the Indian climbers at the base of the mountain. Driving out to Palam that morning, they took an ARC C-46 transport up to Haldwani. At the far corner of the airstrip, they boarded an Mi-4 and lifted into the sky.

When Tom and Rob stepped from the chopper, Kohli welcomed his old friends back. He exchanged pleasantries with newcomers Sam, Barry, and Balu, and they all began discussing the mission at hand. The Indian climbers had already selected a site for the Advance Base Camp at 15,000 feet. To avoid potential difficulties with the walkie-talkies, they had strung a telephone wire between Base Camp and Advance Base Camp.

After allowing the American friends to acclimatize for the next two days, they all began shuttling supplies to Advance Base Camp on 12 May. The weather was not the best—evidence that the summer monsoons were bearing down—forcing them to make less initial progress than expected.

Nanda Kot from the perspective of Advance Base Camp. (Courtesy Tsuyoshi Takeda)

Not until 14 May did the skies sufficiently clear for them to properly lay siege to the slopes. Perhaps to make a statement about his health, Sonam was in the lead of the column stomping a path from Advance Base Camp up toward Camp One. Behind him, their Ladakh prodigy Wangyal kept a steady pace, followed by Sisodia.

During any normal second quarter of the year, the bottom half of Nanda Kot should have been relatively free of snow and ice. But due to the unusually heavy snowfall on 3 May, everything from Advance Base Camp upward remained buried under a thick layer of powder. Baking by day and refreezing by night, it made for an inherently unstable slope.

Perhaps predictably, the mountain rumbled just short of their goal. Looking upward, Sonam, Wangyal, and Sisodia saw a veritable wall of snow steamrolling in their direction. Terrified, the three turned around and tried to run—a near impossibility, given their padded clothes and the slippery, calf-deep powder. Roped together, they half-stumbled, half-dragged one another downward. With tons of snow bearing down, they instinctively knew they had no chance of outpacing the avalanche. In an act

of desperation, Sonam—prayer flags fluttering from his rucksack—yanked them sideways. It was a calculation that saved their lives. By a mere few feet, they were out of the avalanche's line of descent. The snow tore past them like a locomotive, hitting them with nothing more than a light dusting. Exhausted and relieved, they continued their descent for a much-deserved rest.

As this was transpiring, Balu and Rob had moved up to Advance Base Camp to drop off a load of food. The sky had turned dark and more snow started to fall, but they stayed their ground and entered a tent for the night. Although the snow and freezing drizzle showed no sign of abating the next day, they pressed ahead, conducting shuttles through noon. In this, they were helped by the six Tibetan commandos allocated for the duration of the mission. Farther up, Wangyal and Sisodia, accompanied by two Sherpas, finished the route to Camp One and set up some tents.

By 16 May, all the U.S. and Indian climbers had made good progress. The skies had fully cleared, making for the best climbing weather imaginable. Taking the lead, Balu and Rob stomped their way through the snow and extended the route nearly to Camp Two.

Their fast progress prompted Kohli to transmit a radio message to ARC headquarters in New Delhi. The message was addressed specifically to Anandbhai K. Dave, who had succeeded Kao as ARC director in mid-1966. Known for his sharp intellect and independent mind, Dave had joined the Indian police back in 1942 and switched to the Intelligence Bureau twelve years later. Widely recognized as one of the bureau's premier experts on China and Tibet (he had been the first Indian official to meet the Dalai Lama when the latter went into exile in 1959), he was one of the rising stars in the intelligence community. His promotion to ARC director put him on the fast track toward the top of the entire organization.

The message to Dave was short and simple. In a prearranged code, Kohli gave clearance for a chopper to arrive later that day. Aboard the Mi-4

would be two U.S. nuclear experts from the Atomic Energy Commission and the disassembled sensor. If all went well, the fueling process would take place within the next twenty-four hours.

From a mountaineer's perspective, 19 May dawned in a most auspicious fashion. Standing alongside Sam Currie, Kohli watched the sunlight work its way down the squat eastern slope of Nanda Kot. Set against a cloudless blue sky, the peak was an almost irradiant white. Through binoculars, they could see tiny figures moving around Camp Two. Beyond that, they could just make out the rounded edge of the Dome.

Leaving Sam behind, Kohli suited up and joined half a dozen Sherpas and the six Tibetans in making a supply shuttle up to Advance Base Camp. Upon arrival, he found Wangyal, Wangyal II, and Balu resting after several days of strenuous hikes. Checking in by walkie-talkie, Kohli learned that there were seven persons—Rob, Tom, Barry, Sonam, Sisodia, and two Sherpas—packed into Camp One. Farther up, Rawat, Bhangu, and two Sherpas were already blazing a trail past Camp Two. This promised to be the biggest challenge of the ascent, as it took them over a particularly nasty feature at the 20,000-foot level known as the Saddle. As the name suggests, the Saddle was a pronounced depression in the slope—almost like an amphitheater turned on its side—with the upper edge curling backward at a sharp angle. Once clear of the Saddle, they would have a straight shot at the final 1,000 feet to the Dome.

Edging over the Saddle.

The weather remained favorable, so they kept up a hectic pace through late afternoon. By 1630 hours, the four-man contingent at Camp Two—having left behind most of their kit to keep themselves relatively light and maneuverable—managed to spider its way up and across the Saddle. On the far side, they scouted a good location for Camp Three and retreated down the slope. The Dome, Kohli radioed back to New Delhi, would be theirs the next day.

4. Currie interview.

3. When the SFF doubled in size, the Intelligence Bureau for the first time approved the inclusion of ethnic groups other than Tibetans. Notably, about 500 Gurkhas were accepted into its ranks. However, because the Tibetan

majority strongly protested this ethnic dilution, the Gurkhas were segregated into a subordinate unit (known as G Group), which was limited to base security and administrative duties.

2. Correctly noting that McKniff had come under criticism for the missing generator, Kohn ("Nanda Devi Caper," p. 28) claimed that mounting tension in India prompted some of the U.S. mountaineers to confront CIA and Indian intelligence officers, even to the point of getting into a fistfight with an Indian operative and berating the head of the Intelligence Bureau. This is completely false; the relationship between Indian and American participants in the mission—both climbers and intelligence officers—remained warm throughout the entire project.

1. Interview with Wayne Sanford, 21 November 1998; interview with Sam Currie, 24 February 2000.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Dome

On the morning of 20 May, Rawat, Bhangu, and two Sherpas departed Camp Two and headed up the Saddle. They again left their kit behind to keep themselves light for the tough climb ahead. The wind had blown during the night, all but obliterating the path cut the day before. Roped together, they curled over its upper lip with considerable effort, bypassed the site they had selected for Camp Three, and at long last reached the Dome.

Of all the geological features they had witnessed over the past two years, the Dome was unique. It protruded off the side of Nanda Kot like a smooth, pregnant boil the size of a house, its gentle angle allowing the snow to remain relatively fixed without gravity pulling it down the slope. This allowed the snow to reach at least ten feet deep—in some places much more—with the lower layers becoming progressively compacted into an icy core.

Crunching their way across a glaze baked by the sun's ultraviolet rays, the four climbers made a circuit around the Dome. Approving of its smooth topography, they concurred with the earlier supposition that it would serve as an excellent perch for the sensor. This initial survey complete, they retreated back to Camp Two.

As this was transpiring, a major push was under way toward Camp One. Under clear skies, Wangyal, Wangyal II, Balu, and six Sherpas were hauling several hundred pounds of food and equipment destined for the upper reaches. Because Kohli's future was tied to the success of this mission, he elected to join them for the shuttle. By that time, he was answering primarily to Dave as head of ARC. Dave, in turn, was staying in close touch with Mullik, who was still helming the entire climbing project, despite officially stepping down as director general of security in the

summer of 1966. Unfortunately for Kohli, neither Dave nor Mullik was renowned for patience. Thus far, they had successfully contained the fallout (figuratively) following the loss of the Nanda Devi device, but Kohli knew that a second failure on Nanda Kot would not be acceptable.

Complicating matters was the backdrop of strain in Indo-U.S. relations. Although Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and President Lyndon Johnson had surpassed expectations by getting along famously at a March 1966 summit in Washington, the honeymoon proved short-lived. As the two governments sparred over various issues—especially American policy in Vietnam, a topic particularly close to Johnson's heart—bilateral relations lost their luster.

Intelligence cooperation, in particular, was on the wane. This was true for several reasons. First, previous showcases for joint action, such as the SFF, had already matured and had little need for ongoing CIA assistance, aside from an occasional specialist instructor. Second, the Soviet Union, which was doing all it could to score points with India, lost few opportunities to eclipse American inroads. When the United States did not schedule further aircraft deliveries for ARC, for example, the Soviets stepped forward and provided the An-12 transport as the new mainstay of the ARC fleet. Third, there had been a furor in the Indian parliament in early 1967 over alleged CIA activities to influence national elections; some of this uneasiness was attributed to Soviet-sponsored forgeries designed to exacerbate Indo-U.S. friction.[1]

The result was that Tucker Gougelmann, the CIA's senior paramilitary adviser, had relatively little on his books other than the covert climbing expedition. Its success was important not only because of the mission's intelligence by-product—which both governments desired—but also because it was the best thing the CIA had going in India.

Upon reaching Camp One, Kohli caught up with a resting Sonam and inquired about his back. He smiled and waved Kohli off. Judging from his

sharp movements and jovial attitude, his painful frostbite did not seem to be flaring up.

More personnel continued to arrive over the course of the day. A party of five Sherpas came near last light, along with a pair of SFF porters. The two Tibetans were doing yeoman's work as porters, despite their inadequate clothing and footwear.

The next morning, all of them, including the SFF men, geared up for the climb to the next level. It took nearly four hours of monotonous hiking over an almost featureless slope. Since the Tibetans had not been expected to go past Advance Base Camp, Kohli was happy with their willingness to work. Generations of mountain living had left them with legs like spring steel; the day's labor barely left them winded.

Arriving at Camp Two, they found Rawat, Bhangu, and two Sherpas recuperating from their earlier efforts higher on the mountain. All four quickly departed for Base Camp, where they were scheduled to take receipt of the sensor and bring it upward. For the rest of them, Camp Two was a cramped fit. Piled nine deep in two tents, they were a most uncomfortable and unhygienic mass of humanity. As during most climbs, the majority of the men had developed hacking coughs and colds. Despite this, spirits were surprisingly high, and the skies were staying clear.

Camp Two, Nanda Kot. In the background is Nanda Devi and Nanda Devi East.

Unwilling to let good climbing weather go to waste, Tom and Balu roped themselves together and departed to improve the route through the Saddle. This area, they correctly calculated, was going to be the critical bottleneck in their effort to get bulky loads to the Dome. Its sharp upper slope was covered with powder and a loose, rocky substructure, making efforts to stomp a solid path and fix safety lines exceedingly difficult. And because it was framed by sheer rock faces on either side, deviating to the left or right was not an option.

After several hours, the two Americans withdrew to Camp Two. As the sun dipped below the horizon, Rob toyed with a CIA-supplied radio they were using to communicate with Sam at the base of the mountain. Scanning the frequencies, he picked up a conversation in a strange language. Gathering to listen, several of the members identified it as Pushtun, one of

the main tongues of Afghanistan. The CIA, it seemed, had provided them with some fairly powerful equipment.

At dawn, the combined parties again looked to tackle the problem posed by the Saddle. They divided into smaller groups, each attempting to find a better path over its upper lip. Try as they might, however, there was no easy way up its sheer slope. Those who were encumbered with heavy loads found progress next to impossible. Only after considerable effort, and lots of pushing and pulling, were they able to fix a series of ropes and reach the proposed location for Camp Three. Rushing to clear a platform and pitch tents, they depleted their last energy reserves in the thin air. Fully spent, they downed some tasteless dry rations before collapsing for the night.

The morning of 23 May appeared to have everything going for it, dawning bright and clear. The climbers were out of their tents by 0900 and on the slope. After a couple of hours, they reached the Dome and immediately began leveling a site for the sensor. By noon, their excavating efforts were complete. Using gloved hands and ice axes, they had stripped off the upper crust and exposed the deep powder underneath. They cleared away a rectangular platform and paused to await the device.

Almost as if on cue, Rawat, Bhangu, and their two Sherpas appeared over the top of the Saddle. Each carried one of the four main components of the sensor, with the Sherpas bickering over the dubious privilege of manpacking the warm nuclear generator. Arriving at the excavated depression, the four climbers deposited their loads and fell back on the snow, chests heaving.

With success almost within reach, Kohli reflected on their efforts of the past three weeks. Compared with the hardships endured in the Sanctuary, Nanda Kot had almost been too easy. From being feted during the approach march, to the good weather, to the more manageable slope—all were monumental improvements over the expedition to the Blessed

Goddess. And with helicopter access easier than in the Sanctuary, General Thondup was afforded a steady stream of fresh vegetables and live chickens and goats (the chickens tended to die quickly in the thin air, but the meat was still fresh). If that were not enough, Tucker Gougelmann had arranged for a Twin Helio to make a regular mail drop over Base Camp with letters from home. Tucker was also doing his best to forward U.S. cigarettes, scotch, and even bottles of a noxious Indian rum called "Black Stallion," which Kohli was saving for the celebration at the end of the climb. Most mountaineering expeditions did not have it so good, which meant that fate was about to equalize things.

Just as they were set to remove the sensor components from the backpacks, Kohli asked for an inventory of the implements needed to secure the device into the ground. His request was answered by blank stares. Ever since planning the mission in April, they had been fully aware of the thick snow and ice capping the Dome. For that reason, they had intended to use extra tent pegs and rope to keep the antenna and transmitters upright and properly aligned. A load of pegs, carabiners, and safety line had been procured for just this purpose, and Bhangu assured him that it had been dispatched from New Delhi with the rest of their gear.

But now that Kohli asked, nobody had a clue where the load was. An infuriating round of finger-pointing and eye-rolling ensued. The end result: they had a collection of some of the best U.S. and Indian mountaineers standing near the top of a major Himalayan peak with a nuclear-powered spy sensor but were missing a handful of common items necessary for its installation. If the situation were not so serious, it would have been comical.

And it soon got worse. As they brainstormed a way of securing the device without pegs or ropes, flakes began to fall from the sky. In what seemed like just minutes, a bank of clouds blew in from the south and came up flush with the side of Nanda Kot. Day quickly turned into night. As the snow and wind reached blizzard conditions, they all knew that it was

imperative to descend the slope. Because there was only a single tent at Camp Three—and it had yet to be stocked with food—they all decided to reverse their steps down the Saddle and not stop until they reached Camp Two. And since they had been crucified for leaving behind the generator on Nanda Devi, Kohli insisted that the device not leave their sight.

The descent proved to be sheer hell. Snow whipped up from below, stinging the exposed flesh on their faces until it felt like they had taken shots of novocaine directly into the cheeks and forehead. The powder also drove deep into their nostrils and mouths; combined with the thin air, the net effect was one of slow suffocation.

By the time they reached the upper lip of the Saddle, visibility was near zero. Groping in the fresh snow, they located their buried safety lines, snapped on, and stumbled downward in a half-controlled fall. When they came to the bottom, they roped off with partners and felt their way forward like a line of blind men.

It was nearly nightfall by the time they reached Camp Two. The tents were half buried, and the storm showed no sign of abating. Kohli looked like a frozen wreck, with his mustache and beard streaming icicles of condensation. Turning to his teammates, he took a fast head count, and all the climbers were accounted for. Kohli said a few prayers of thanks for this. For a brief moment, they had underestimated the fury of Nanda Kot and had nearly paid with their lives.

After a surprisingly deep sleep, Kohli woke, glanced at his watch, and saw that it was the morning of 24 May. But peering from his tent, there was no way to know that it had dawned. The sun was completely obliterated, and the onslaught of snow had continued almost without pause since the previous afternoon.

Snow was only part of his worries. Taking an inventory of their food stocks, he calculated that they had less than two days of rations on hand. This put him in a quandary. The monsoon season would hit in full force by

the beginning of June, which meant that they had no more than a week left to complete their task. If they waited at Camp Two for clear skies, they ran the risk of running out of food if there was a delay of more than forty-eight hours. And if they depleted their food reserves, they would have to waste precious days restocking that level before trying the Dome again. Moreover, remaining at that altitude under frigid conditions for an extended period raised serious health concerns. Weighing the risks, Kohli decided to err on the side of caution. Quickly, he passed the word that they would head down to Base Camp to wait out the storm.

The men reacted to the decision with relief and wasted no time throwing on their gear and exiting the tents into the blizzard. Visibility was still very poor, making it nearly impossible to plot a good route. Kohli was at the front of the pack, cutting a trail around a snowy shelf. For a brief moment, the wind died down just long enough for him to spy a relatively clear stretch ahead. Surging forward, he was suddenly brightened by the thought that before long they would be in the relative comfort of Base Camp. Kohli could not hear his teammates shouting at him; their calls were muffled by his head stocking and thick parka hood. Not until the last moment did he turn around and register horror. He had seen plenty of avalanches before, and this one was relatively small. The snowy shelf he had just bypassed had collapsed, releasing perhaps a few dozen tons of snow. But being on the receiving end of even a small avalanche was like wandering onto a highway and seeing a truck bearing down on you a nanosecond before impact.

Though the next moment took but a fraction of a second, Kohli managed to experience a range of sensations and emotions. First and foremost was a feeling of utter terror. Probably not unlike a monster wave manhandling a surfer, the wall of snow hit him in the torso and pulled him off his feet. The main blast registered on his side, knocking all the air from his lungs. Instinctively he tried to draw in a breath but tasted only icy

powder. Part of the concussion also hit his head, and his vision quickly began to fade. What followed was almost like a dream. Swept down the slope at the front of the avalanche, Kohli was moving at a terrific speed. Worse, he was falling headfirst on his back with no ability to maneuver back onto his feet.

In the end, it all came down to luck. Two hundred feet from where he got hit, the slope banked slightly. As the avalanche reached this point, it impacted with a blast of powder. A portion of the slab of snow continued downward along an altered path, but its momentum was spent. Mercifully, Kohli was deposited on the snowbank with a few odd bruises. Even more miraculous, he had come to a stop less than ten feet from a yawning crevasse. Had he fallen in, he would have been buried by a couple of tons of snow.

Thankfully, they were able to reach Base Camp by midafternoon without further incident. To their delight, General Thondup had prepared some extraordinary chicken and goat dishes. After four days of dry rations and weak tea, the climbers devoured his fare in record time. Thanks to the food, combined with the relatively higher percentage of oxygen in the air, their fatigue and body aches largely vanished by nightfall.

There were still a few more surprises in store for them, however. For the rest of the night, the snow continued to fall across the peak. Rather than showing any sign of clearing, by morning the blizzard had increased in intensity. Huddling with Sam Currie, they agreed that it had been wise to get off the mountain when they did. Still, Kohli could not shake the feeling that perhaps the summer monsoon season had arrived a bit prematurely, meaning that they would have to wait until the monsoons petered out in the fall. If that were the case, he was certain that Dave and Mullik would not be amused by yet another delay in getting the sensor activated, especially after the comedy of errors with the lost tent pegs.

Perhaps sensing his anxiety, two of the Sherpas suited up and headed for the slope with a walkie-talkie. Kohli followed their progress through the afternoon, not at all convinced that their heroics were worth the risk. Close to nightfall, their voices crackled over the radio. They had reached Camp Two but reported that the slope was a dangerous mess. Kohli told them to hold their position for at least twenty-four hours.

The next morning, weather conditions marginally improved. This prompted all available climbers to don their gear and lay siege to the slope. Nanda Kot, unfortunately, was just toying with them. As their lead elements were approaching Camp One, the intensity of the storm kicked up several notches. With everything getting buried, they made a hasty retreat down the mountain. All arrived for lunch except for Rob and Tom. Reminiscent of their spectacular effort on Nanda Devi the previous year, both tried to soldier on against the odds, but nature was too much for even this determined pair; by late afternoon, they had been beaten back to the base.

On 27 May, not a single climber set foot on Nanda Kot. The radio messages from New Delhi were growing sharp and impatient, but with the blizzard entering its fifth day, their replies contained little hope. Kohli was almost positive that they had entered the monsoon season and that for the next four months, any attempt would be futile. They could wait around for a couple more days, he figured, but the chance of an extended break in the weather was growing more remote.

Reflecting on this, Kohli had trouble seeing any silver lining. Just as on Nanda Devi, they had come within a hair of accomplishing their goal, only to be frustrated at the last possible moment. The gods, perhaps, were trying to tell them something.

In hindsight, Kohli was a bit premature in his meteorological assessment. On the morning of 28 May, he emerged from his tent and saw something all too uncommon the previous week. The sky was blue—almost a deep turquoise—and there was no hint of clouds in any direction. His

colleagues were looking upward at the same thing, mesmerized by the perfect weather.

They had been given a second chance, but the calendar dictated that their window of opportunity would be extremely limited. With every minute precious, six of the climbers—Rob, Tom, Barry, Rawat, Bhangu, and Sisodia—suited up. They were to be joined by eight Sherpas and six Tibetan commandos. Among their gear was the disassembled sensor.

While Sam and Kohli monitored the radio, the climbing party reported slow but steady progress toward Camp One. It was a grueling climb, with the soft accumulation of fresh snow reducing their speed to a crawl. Reaching their target by last light, they found only a sliver of exposed orange nylon betraying the location of the buried tents.

The next day was a nail-biter. The weather was still holding—for how long, nobody knew—but progress was even slower due to the thinner air and knee-deep powder. And with the sun heating up the upper reaches, the telltale rumble of avalanching was growing more frequent. Leaving the Tibetans behind, the six climbers and four Sherpas pushed forward to Camp Two by early afternoon. With an eye on the clock, several from the party continued to the Saddle in an attempt to reopen a route. It was, predictably, an exhausting slog. The steep angle of the slope was now working in their favor, however, as it had allowed for little accumulation of powder. This made it easier to locate the safety lines left behind from the previous week. Rehabilitating the path to the best of their ability, they then retreated to Camp Two for a good meal and sleep. If all things remained equal, tomorrow would be D day.

On the morning of 30 May, Kohli took out his climbing diary and wrote three words: DAY OF EXCITEMENT. After two years of painful fits and starts, they were on the verge of success. With Sisodia and one Sherpa staying behind to tend to the food, the remaining five climbers and three Sherpas departed for the Saddle at 0530 hours.

Among the gear they were hauling was a butane stove. When Kohli had come back from the Dome a week earlier, he had ordered a careful search for the missing equipment needed to secure the device. The load was nowhere to be found—probably pilfered en route from New Delhi, or possibly thrown from one of the ponies that plunged to its death. Either way, they needed to improvise an alternative means of securing the device into the ice. Putting their heads together, they had arrived at a primitive yet practical solution. If they heated water to a sufficient temperature, they could use it to bore four holes deep into the snowcap. Into each hole would be inserted the posts of the main components of the sensor. They could then pour cooler water around the posts, which would quickly harden into icy cement. Though they did not have a chance to field-test their theory, the underlying physics appeared sound.

But before they could start heating water, the climbers first needed to conquer the Saddle. This was, of course, not their first encounter with this feature, but it was not getting any easier over time. Snapping into safety lines and leveraging off their ice axes and crampons, they powered their way upward. A grueling three hours later, they were across its upper lip. From that point, it was a relatively easy hike past the barely visible tent at Camp Three and onto the Dome. Down at Base Camp, Sam and Kohli caught sporadic glimpses of them through a set of high-powered binoculars.

Selecting an appropriate site dead center on the Dome, the Sherpas quickly set up the butane burner and pumped the handle on its side to build up internal pressure in the unit. Atop this was placed a large cooking pot partially filled with snow. But just as human beings are seriously affected by high altitudes, so is fire. Although the butane burner was turned on, apart from a rare flicker of orange, the sickly flame was barely visible in the rarefied air. Further diffused by a steady wind blowing across the top of the Dome, the amount of heat coming off the top of the unit was negligible.

Melting snow and heating the water to any appreciable degree, they suddenly realized, was far easier said than done.

Through noon, the Sherpas cooked their snow. Shoulder to shoulder, they had gathered upwind to act as a human windbreak. Slowly, the snow dissolved into an icy slush, then fully liquefied. The temperature of the water, however, was still near freezing and would probably not melt deep enough into the snowcap. The impatient mountaineers began to wonder if the butane would be exhausted before the task was complete. “If that proved the case and they again failed to install the sensor,” said Kohli, “I could think of no more horrific climax to the climbing season.”

Fortunately, it did not come to that. Shortly before 1300 hours, they removed the pot of water from the burner and tipped the pot over a spot marked on the snow. The water acted exactly as predicted. In a puff of steam, the liquid sizzled downward like a knife through warm butter. With perfect timing, other members inserted the post from the generator into the hole. The tip of the post, which was slightly pointed, bit into the slush at the bottom. Almost instantly, it grew sturdy as the water solidified. In no more than a minute, the post seemed to be set in a base of concrete.

At exactly 1315 hours, the climbers hit a pair of switches. The generator responded with a barely perceptible hum: it was starting to produce electricity. The Sherpas, who had respectfully nicknamed this piece of equipment Guru Rimpoche (a Tibetan Buddhist term meaning “incarnate teacher”), broke into boyish grins.

Returning the pot of water to the butane burner for a quick reheat, the climbers maneuvered the first transmitter into position. At 1440 hours, Kohli received word over the radio that its post was fixed firmly into the Dome. Twenty minutes later, the second transmitter was up. Another fifteen minutes after that, the last component—the antenna—was standing upright. As one of the U.S. climbers took out a camera to document their

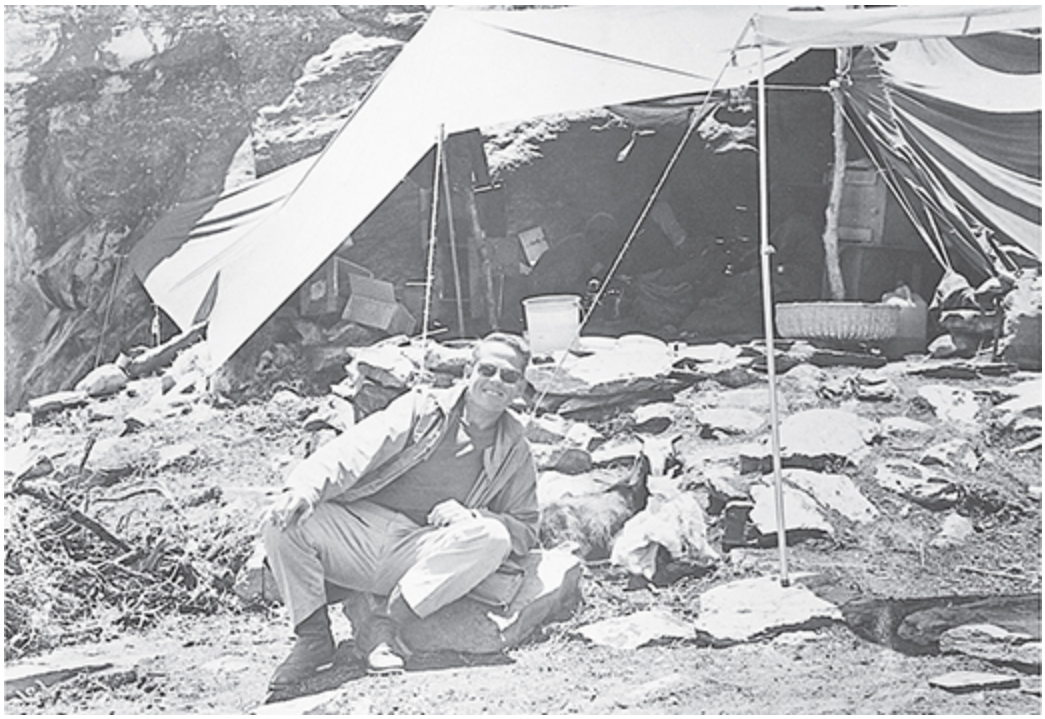
handiwork, another took a piton and scratched the letters AMF (for adios, motherfucker) into the side of a transmitter casing.[2]

A fast systems check indicated that all the elements of the device were working properly. Sam and Kohli passed word to Sandev, where CIA technician Gordon Sleeper was manning a relay station along with a team of four U.S.-trained Indian counterparts. He began a battery of tests to determine if the antenna and transmitters were properly aligned and calibrated. If not, the climbers might have to fine-tune the positions.[3] A few minutes later, Gordon radioed back a response. The antenna was working perfectly, he said; no alterations were necessary.

Once the men at the Dome received this message, they immediately gathered their kit and headed down. Tom and Rob, perhaps sensing that this would be their last chance to participate in a CIA-sponsored mountaineering junket, elected to remain behind at Camp Two for a final night. The rest continued down to Base Camp, arriving at intervals before sunset.

Their celebration that evening made up for the previous years of frustration. General Thondup surpassed himself with a delectable goat barbecue, and the whiskey sent from New Delhi was broken open. A message of congratulations from Mullik came in at 1900 hours. The Sherpas and Tibetans sang and danced. It was hard to find a dry eye.

The next two days were bittersweet. Mullik and Dave flew in to offer their personal congratulations. The Sherpas and SFF commandos spent the time disassembling the upper camps and bringing the gear down to Base Camp, where it was flown back to New Delhi by helicopter. Leaving on the helicopters, too, were the American climbers. They had been a fantastic bunch, judged Kohli, all thoroughly professional and highly motivated. They promised to stay in touch, which was not inconceivable, since the international climbing fraternity was not that big.



Sam Currie and the last goat just before leaving Nanda Kot Base Camp, 1 June 1967.

Sam was the last American to go. He was busy removing all evidence of their presence, even though the government had declared Nanda Kot and the rest of the mountains in and around the Sanctuary off-limits to climbing expeditions. They had built a bonfire to burn their refuse, and he was about to incinerate several boxes of rations that had passed their expiration date, but the Tibetans stopped him. Famished, they devoured the dated supplies; Sam was left with only the packaging to burn. The last item needing disposal was a single live goat that had been spared General Thondup's barbecue spit. Sam raised a knife, but this time it was Kohli who stopped him.

"Let it go," he said. "Goats can't talk."

As Sam's Mi-4 settled onto the landing zone, one of its crew began dumping gas. When Sam asked why, the pilot said that he wanted to lighten the aircraft—they were going to fill sacks with pristine snow for the officers' club at the air base.

Nanda Kot had to have the last laugh. Once Sam departed in the Mi-4, Kohli set out on foot with the rest of the Indians, Sherpas, and Tibetans. As the more bulky equipment had already been lifted out by chopper, they had only their personal kit to carry. By that time, there was no mistaking that the monsoon season was upon them. Torrential rains were making the trails slick and turning innocent mountain streams into full-blown rivers. Barely a couple of miles from Base Camp, they came across one such body of water. Choosing a spot that did not appear too deep or turbulent, they began to ford the stream.

With the water barely up to his waist, Kohli prodded the way ahead with his ice ax. Suddenly, the rocky bottom gave way. Pitching forward, he tried in vain to regain his balance. The current, however, immediately swept him off his feet and toward a whirlpool twenty feet from shore. Between the icy chill of the water and the drag of his padded clothing, Kohli knew that he was in big trouble. Not helping matters, the current ricocheted him across a series of boulders just ahead of a small waterfall. With each impact, his vision dimmed.

Fortunately, his colleagues reacted instantaneously. Rushing down the bank, they looked to intercept him just ahead of the waterfall. One of them —Gyan Singh, their ITBP radio officer—reached forward and got a tenuous grip on the collar of his jacket. Pivoting, he propelled Kohli toward the bank. Though Tibetans are not reputed to be good swimmers, an SFF commando jumped into the water and got a second grip. Between the two, Kohli was pulled to shore a bloody mess. Gyan Singh was later awarded the Police Medal for his gallantry. The rest of the team gathered around. They helped Kohli to the closest village, and Rawat ensured that he was given a healthy dose of medicinal brandy.

They found a pair of ponies to rent and continued along a narrow footpath to the next village. Kohli's kit was on the lead animal, and Kohli himself—his face heavily bruised—was on the second one about ten feet

behind. For some reason, the ponies preferred to walk on the outermost edge of the trail, with a raging river some 10,000 feet below. Not comfortable being so close to the precipice, Kohli dismounted and proceeded on foot. No more than five minutes later, the inevitable happened. The rain-softened soil of the trail under the lead pony gave way. It struggled to gain traction with its front hooves, but the weight of Kohli's supplies worked against the animal. Peering over the edge, the climbers could see scarlet marks smeared across the rocks where it had hit on the way down. Kohli was left, quite literally, with the clothes on his back.

Back in New Delhi, Kohli received an invitation to attend the International Meet of Mountaineers at Chamonix, France. Two other members from the 1965 Everest team—Colonel N. Kumar, his deputy leader, and Nawang Gombu, a summiteer—were to accompany him. With the nuclear generator functioning atop Nanda Kot, it suddenly sank in that his days of covert climbing had come to an end and that mountaineering was a sport again.

The three of them left India on 8 July for what promised to be an exciting month of communion with the European peaks. Within five days of their arrival, they set out for Mont Blanc, the highest mountain on the continent. The way up was breathtaking. They even managed to come across the remnants of the Air India plane that had crashed into the slope two years earlier; it now looked like a metallic beached whale framed in the snow. That tragedy had claimed the life of Dr. Homi Bhabha, chief of the Indian Atomic Research Center.

After slightly more than four hours, they stood atop the summit of Mont Blanc. Feeling inspired, they decided to move laterally toward the nearby peak of Aignille de Midi. In hindsight, it was a foolhardy decision. Although all three of them were experts on the geographic and meteorological nuances of the Himalayas, the Alps were foreign. No sooner had they departed when the weather deteriorated with frightening speed.

Seeing a pair of climbers ahead of them, they shouted for help but apparently could not be heard. With visibility low, the windchill factor high, and the idiosyncrasies of the peak unfamiliar to them, they were at a distinct disadvantage. Using their last reserves of energy, they pushed forward and, thankfully, sighted a chalet. All three of them made mental notes to do their homework before further exploration in the Alps.

Upon his return to India, Kohli got word that the search for the missing device on Nanda Devi—on hold since the previous fall—was back on the fast track. This took him by surprise, because it was still the middle of summer, meaning that monsoon rains would make movement to the Sanctuary nearly impossible. Regardless, impatient intelligence officials from both the United States and India were insisting that the expedition get under way immediately.

Most of the planning had already been done while Kohli was in Europe. Selected as team leader was Rawat, who by that time had been promoted to joint assistant director in ARC. He was to be assisted by R. E. Sharma and R. M. Bhatnagar, both junior intelligence officials and climbing novices who had graduated from Sonam's Mountaineering Institute.

Overseeing administrative matters was Lieutenant Commander Joginder "Jogi" Singh. Jogi and Kohli went back a long way, having been in the same graduating class in the Indian Navy. Soon after Kohli's induction into the ITBP, Jogi followed. He had passed both the basic and the advanced courses at HMI and was rated a sound mountaineer with an excellent temperament and team spirit. Kohli had confirmed as much while on his climbing party to Nanda Devi East and Trisuli in 1964.

Rounding out the search party was Captain B. Nath as team physician, a pair of radiomen, a pair of scientists, and ten of their best Sherpas. There were to be no American climbers or case officers on the expedition. Also absent were the modified Huskie helicopters, whose contribution had not been critical during their infrequent flights in 1966.

Aside from Rawat and the Sherpas, the others were newcomers to the project. To lend the mission some experienced backbone, both Bhangu and Kohli were assigned at the eleventh hour in supporting roles.

On 24 August, the expedition staged from New Delhi in two phases. Sharma, Bhatnagar, one of the radiomen, and all the Sherpas left in the first group. They were followed the next day by Rawat, Jogi, Dr. Nath, Bhangu, and Kohli. Though they all reached Rishikesh with little difficulty, the monsoons soon took a toll. For the next four days, the road beyond Rishikesh remained closed due to landslides brought on by the heavy seasonal rain. Each morning, they asked the local traffic police about the status of the road; each morning, the reply was extremely pessimistic. Cold and wet, they could do little more than wait for a break in the weather.

The bad news did not stop there. While waiting in Rishikesh, Kohli received a coded message from New Delhi informing him that the device on Nanda Kot had suddenly stopped working for reasons unknown. He was to immediately prepare another team that would determine the problem and get the sensor back in operation. His days of covert climbing had returned with a vengeance.

3. According to Kohn ("Nanda Devi Caper," p. 29), the CIA technician at Sandev was forced to use Man-Tan, a cosmetic cream that simulates a suntan, in order to remain inconspicuous among his Indian colleagues. Gordon Sleeper scoffs at this. "I never used it. My only hardship was no haircut for three months." Correspondence with Gordon Sleeper, 16 September 2001.

2. When the photos were later shown to the director of the CIA, he reportedly wanted to know what "AMF" meant. Interview with Woodson Johnson, 27 November 1998. Johnson was a CIA paramilitary adviser in India at the time.

1. Foreign Relations of the United States, vol. 25, South Asia, Document #428, “Telegram from the Embassy in India to the Department of State,” 28 March 1967.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Whipsawed

On 29 August, Bhangu and Kohli left the soaked environs of Rishikesh on a flight to New Delhi. They were met on the tarmac by a stern-looking ARC officer who kept asking the same question: Why had the Nanda Kot sensor gone dead after just three months? Kohli did not have a clue, and told him as much, but he thought they might get some answers during an aerial reconnaissance of the peak. ARC had already made arrangements for a C-46 transport to overfly the mountain; Kohli would be aboard with a Swedish Hassenblad camera to document what he saw. Bhangu, meanwhile, would start logistical preparations for a hike back to the Dome.

The reconnaissance mission proved eventful. On the way up, Kohli was glued to the window like a kid, thoroughly enjoying the thrill of examining the Himalayan range from the air. As Nanda Kot loomed ahead, his attention zeroed in on its Dome. Just as they came abreast of the peak, the C-46 pitched forward. Kohli, not wearing a seat belt, lurched up until his turban hit the ceiling. Spilling onto the floor, he was momentarily convinced that they had hit the mountain. As the pilot regained stability after a drop of several hundred feet, he sent word from the cockpit that they had hit a pocket of severe clear-air turbulence. Heart pounding, Kohli returned to his window-side vigil and finished off a roll of film. The Hassenblad's powerful lens was capturing the slope in exquisite detail.

Upon his return to New Delhi, Kohli joined ARC officials in poring over the photographs with a magnifying glass. The Dome looked utterly smooth; there was no sign of any foreign device on its surface. If the ARC wanted fast answers about the device, no clues would be found in the pictures.

Kohli next shifted his attention to preparing a team for Nanda Kot. Unfortunately, he would be competing for mountaineering talent with the concurrent operation to Nanda Devi. Besides Bhangu and himself, he was fortunate to secure the participation of Wangyal, Sisodia, and a few of the Sherpas who had been with them in the spring. Joining them for the first time would be D. Bhutia, a junior intelligence officer and ethnic Sikkimese working at Sonam's Mountaineering Institute in Gangtok. They were also given an ITBP radioman and, as porters, ten SFF Tibetans and an equal number of ITBP jawans.

Departing via Tejam in mid-September, they made quick progress to the base of Nanda Kot. The summer monsoons had ended by that time, giving them a one-month window of opportunity. If they delayed past that period, the onset of serious winter snow would make climbing prohibitive.

Just as they began to pitch tents, Kohli got a radio call requesting his presence at Rishikesh to help with urgent administrative matters for the Nanda Devi expedition. He felt whipsawed by the two missions, unable to focus properly on either. The chopper that came to fetch him—landing at the same pad near Base Camp cleared during the earlier expedition—brought Sonam Gyatso. He would be looking after the operation in Kohli's absence.

On 22 September, the Nanda Kot climbers moved up to establish Advance Base Camp. Based on lessons learned during the spring, they decided to build it 500 feet above the previous site in an area near plentiful running water. In addition, they felt that Camp Three was overkill; Camps One and Two were sufficient interim resting points on the way to the Dome.

During his absence, Sonam sent Kohli regular radio updates. They were making good progress, he said, and were able to establish Camp One on 25 September. This welcome news was offset by word that one of the ITBP jawans had become seriously ill. In their haste, they had been unable

to find a team physician, so Sonam had to organize an emergency delivery of medicine for the stricken trooper.

Sonam had another pressing concern. The temperature had started to plummet well below freezing at night, driving home the need to get the mission completed within no more than two weeks. Sensing the gravity of the situation, Kohli left Rishikesh and rushed back to Nanda Kot. By the time he arrived at month's end, his men were on the verge of a final push to the Dome. Bhangu and Wangyal were leading a party of three Sherpas and a single Tibetan SFF commando from Camp One to the newly established Camp Two. Already at Camp Two were Sonam, Sisodia, Bhutia, and another contingent of Sherpas. Bhutia and one Sherpa spent the afternoon stomping a route up the Saddle. Though it was still a major obstacle—prompting consideration of using a ladder to scale its toughest angles—both climbers were able to negotiate its features and fix a series of safety lines before retreating to their tents at nightfall.

On the morning of 1 October, seven climbers departed Camp Two and began worming their way over the Saddle. They had all succeeded by noon, but the effort left them spent. Although they had previously written off the need for Camp Three, having an extra rest station suddenly seemed rather appealing. Fortunately, they had packed an extra tent for just such a contingency. While Sisodia, Bhutia, and a Sherpa paused to pitch it 200 feet short of the Dome, the remaining four Sherpas continued upward.

Using their axes and crampons to surmount the final stretch, the four were soon standing atop the Dome. The answer as to why the device had gone silent became evident immediately. The rectangular platform where it had been installed on 30 May was now a pronounced swelling on an otherwise smooth snowfield. Moving closer and probing the bump with the reverse ends of their axes, they quickly uncovered the antenna. Even more amazing, they chipped away a narrow window in the powder to reveal a

subterranean cavity surrounding the generator; its warm sides had kept the snow at bay in a three-foot radius all around.

When he got word of this at Base Camp, Kohli was not too surprised. Mountaineers had long noticed a strange phenomenon on mountain peaks. It was customary for climbers to leave behind a memento after reaching a summit, such as a flag or a pennant. If this was limited to a single flag post, the snow would take an extremely long time to accumulate; they could often return years later and, provided the wind had not blown it down, find the pole still fully exposed. If they placed more than one flag post in close proximity, however, there was a totally different result. Snow would almost immediately accumulate in the space in between, burying all the posts in short order.

This is apparently what had happened to their nuclear device. Although the four components were elevated off the surface by posts, the posts' close proximity made them a choice target for snowdrift accumulation. A single season of monsoon snows was all it took to bury the entire apparatus under the surface.

Kohli conveyed the news to New Delhi, and officials fired back the order to remove the snow and get the device back to operational status. This was easier said than done. Shoveling heavy snow was hard enough at sea level; doing it at high altitude was torture. But with little choice, he told those assembled at the upper camps to get a good rest and start digging in the morning.

The climbers were back on the Dome at daybreak on 2 October. They would be working in shifts, with Sisodia and Bhutia the first to arrive at the top. Taking care not to break any of the buried parts, they gingerly began to remove snow. It was kind of like an archaeological site, but instead of chiseling matrix away from dinosaur bones, they were shoveling snow from the antenna and transmitters. After three hours, they were drained. With fresh snow starting to fall late in the afternoon, they retreated back to Camp

Three for the night. Kohli listened to their update over the walkie-talkie, pleased with their progress but concerned about the weather. He wanted to keep them up there no more than one more day, especially if the snow and wind started to pick up.

By that time, Wangyal had already scaled the Saddle and was eager to try his hand on the Dome. On 3 October, he arrived at the half-exposed device with a pair of Sherpas in tow. Taking over excavation duties, the three peeled away several hundred pounds of powder. By last light, they had managed to slice away the entire snowdrift, allowing the antenna and transmitters to remain exposed just above the snow line. They had also removed the snow from atop the cavity housing the generator, leaving it sitting in the center of its own semispherical depression.

While they were doing this, Kohli received a call from the technicians at Sandev. Almost as soon as the antenna had been unearthed, the device started sending a signal back to the relay station. This was exactly the result wanted by the CIA and the Intelligence Bureau. More than ever, there was concern in Washington and New Delhi over Beijing's nuclear weapons and missile programs.

Despite the upheavals caused by the Cultural Revolution—China's destructive combination of ideological purge, policy dispute, and power struggle—Beijing seemed to be protecting the scientists and technicians working on these projects from the revolution's worst excesses. In August 1966, Beijing's Central Committee had issued a decision that said as much. As further proof, there had been the two nuclear tests in late 1966, then another thermonuclear blast in July 1967.[1] More disconcerting was China's missile program. After the successful October 1966 test flight of the medium-range Dong Feng 2, over-the-horizon radar indicated that the Chinese had performed more than two dozen additional test firings of this rocket during the first half of 1967, almost all of them during May and June. Of greater concern, the U.S. and Indian intelligence services saw a

growing body of evidence that the Chinese might be ready to test an intercontinental ballistic missile—with a range up to 6,000 nautical miles, capable of reaching North America—in the second half of 1967.[2]

Although the Nanda Kot device had not yet relayed missile telemetry data of any import—either because it had not yet been operational during the early 1967 tests or because the rocket signals were not strong enough to reach it—the American and Indian intelligence agencies were understandably eager to have the sensor functioning, given the spike in activity on the Chinese test ranges. The climbers had restored that capability, but for how long was anybody's guess. It had taken just three months for the summer snows to put the antenna out of commission under a snowdrift, and there was no reason to think the winter snows would be any less malicious. Although laymen sitting in the comfort of New Delhi and Washington might think it feasible to hike to the Dome and clear away the powder every quarter, to Kohli—speaking as a mountaineer—it did not sound like a sustainable arrangement.

After their work was done on the Dome, the climbers pulled down tents and carried gear off the mountain. Then they all headed for New Delhi, with a well-deserved vacation foremost in their minds. For some of them, unfortunately, vacations would have to wait.

Over in the Sanctuary, the search operation for the missing device had been progressing in fits and starts. Back on 1 September, their supplies had been stranded for a week at Rishikesh due to closed roads brought on by landslides. There was an additional delay because of the perennial shortage of porters. Most local males were either busy in the fields (it was planting time) or employed by the director general of border roads, an office under the Ministry of Defense. Forced to turn to paramilitary assistance, the expedition was eventually allocated sixty SFF Tibetans and ten ITBP jawans.

On 8 September, the members, Sherpas, and porters worked their way past the landslides and began their trek into the Sanctuary. After two days of maneuvering through the gorge, they were able to emerge from the canyon and send a clear radio signal back to New Dehli. Another three days after that, they reached the Sanctuary's helipad.

As might be expected, smaller problems started to compound into larger ones. Bad weather prevented chopper flights from Gauchar, which caused a delay in the delivery of rations for the large number of Tibetan porters. Doing some simple arithmetic, they calculated that the commandos would start going hungry in about four days if large quantities of food did not arrive. Thinking fast, Rawat elected to make an immediate shuttle to Base Camp, then send the bulk of the SFF contingent out of the Sanctuary before their meager rations were exhausted.

The gamble worked. With the weather still bad and the food supplies almost gone, the Tibetans finished shifting gear to Base Camp. On 17 September, fifty-two of them were ordered to walk back through the gorge. The remaining eight SFF porters, plus Jogi and a Sherpa, remained at the Sanctuary helipad to receive choppers as soon as the cloud bank dissipated.

Not until the next day did the weather start cooperating. In two sorties, ARC rushed in extra rations and supplies. The choppers also brought a pair of nuclear scientists and climber Yonten Zangpo. An accomplished and well-educated Ladakhi, Yonten had been taken directly into the Intelligence Bureau at a rank equivalent to army captain. Like fellow highlanders Sonam and Wangyal, Yonten was highly personable, diligent, and a strong mountaineer.

Because the expedition was left with just eight SFF porters, it took three days to move these latest supplies up to Base Camp. During that time, the two scientists complained of headaches brought on by the altitude, and they were forced to rest at the helipad before going any higher.

Rawat, in the meantime, had been busy reopening Camp One and getting it stocked. This required the normal surge in shuttle activity, which was made more difficult by the expedition's shortage of porters. Compounding matters was the focus of their search. Reflecting collective frustration, their superiors wanted to give the appearance of looking for the generator, even if it made no intuitive sense. As a case in point, Rawat was told to go back up the ridge and scrutinize the upper slopes, especially along the southeastern slope facing the Longstaff Col. To Kohli, this smacked of farce. The Longstaff Col—a ridge named for one of the first British explorers to venture into the Sanctuary—ran off the southern side of neighboring Nanda Devi East, the peak situated along the eastern wall of the Sanctuary. For the device to have fallen in that direction, it would have had to defy gravity by rolling dozens of feet over and across the Camp Four tent site before plunging down the southeastern slope.

Of course, the climbers knew that the remains of the rocky platform that had once supported the device had been strewn down the southwestern —not the southeastern—slope. Hypothetically, if there had been an impossibly ferocious wind that was strong enough to pick up the device and blow it laterally across the campsite, the same strong wind would have carried the Camp Four tents in the same direction. However, they had found the tents still largely where they had left them. Moreover, their earlier experiments with the butane jars left little doubt that they were on the right track when they were searching the nullahs below the Camp Four fall line.

Such clear reasoning aside, somebody in New Delhi had apparently looked at a map and dictated that a search be performed to the southeast. Obeying the request, Rawat and three Sherpas reached the next level on 23 September and pitched tents for Camp Two. They carried with them a powerful Questar telescope, which Rawat used over the next three days to look for signs of man-made objects. Not surprisingly, he saw little of note.

While Rawat was glued to the telescope, the Sherpas pushed higher up the slope. The route was buried under a layer of fresh, slippery snow, which made for frequent delays as they spent forty-eight hours hammering safety lines into the schist. Exhausting their supply of pickets by 29 September, they waited at Camp Two for a resupply.

By that late in the season, gale winds were sweeping over the peak each night. Barely getting any sleep, Rawat and the Sherpas, new pickets in hand, managed to push their way back up to Camp Three at month's end. Using extra rope to secure a pair of four-man tents, they settled in for their first night, which proved memorable. As the winds reached hurricane velocity, the shell of one tent was completely shredded, causing its occupants to flee to the second tent. Each of the climbers sat in a corner to prevent it from being ripped from the ground. Again, there was little sleep to be had.

The next morning, the four emerged to calmer weather. Seemingly drunk from lack of rest, they paused to repair their single viable tent and secure it with additional rope. They then spent the afternoon sweeping the nearby slopes with binoculars and the Questar. They also used a handheld infrared scope, capable of seeing sources of heat, such as the generator, buried under ice, snow, or a thin layer of soil.

Finding nothing, the four pressed upward. Rawat and one of the Sherpas climbed halfway to Camp Four on 2 October and set up the Questar to scour the slope, while the remaining two Sherpas went all the way to Camp Four and probed the immediate vicinity. They found the Camp Four site covered in a heap of ice and hard snow, leaving no place to pitch tents.

After another day of negative search results, this unnecessary diversion had run its course. All higher camps were closed down on 4 October, and Rawat's party was finally allowed to return to Base Camp.

While Rawat was busy eyeballing the slope, the two scientists at the Sanctuary helipad had recovered from their headaches and by 25 September

were waiting at Base Camp. Despite a heavy snowfall that day, the pair—armed with an alpha counter—was escorted to the glacier. In a familiar refrain, they intended to test the ice and scree that had accumulated where the nullahs emptied onto the moraine level. Because almost an entire year had passed since such tests had been performed, there was a good chance that any portion of the generator stuck in the rocky nullahs had been washed down in the interim.

As before, an initial sweep bore negative results. Not to be dissuaded, the scientists went back out on the glacier the rest of the week. This time, they had plenty of company. Along with Jogi, Yonten, Bhatnagar, and some ITBP porters, they made their way over the same terrain with a metal detector and a neutron counter.

On 3 October, their diligence finally bore some tantalizing results. That morning, Jogi, Yonten, Bhatnagar, and a pair of porters had exited Base Camp with their technical gear. They were quick to note that the neutron counter gave an initial reading of 150 counts per minute—slightly higher than the 105 counts recorded during the previous year, but not high enough to cause concern. Making their way to Nullah Two, the four began to sweep an area represented on their maps as grid square G-14. Almost immediately, the neutron counter shot up to 330 counts per minute, then settled back to 200. The climbers were not sure what to make of the anomaly. The generator's nuclear fuel, they were told, would give off a reading of 1,000 counts per minute. In addition, a pass by the metal detector over the same area was negative.

Reporting back to the scientists at Base Camp that night, Yonten and Bhatnagar were asked to return to G-14 the next day to confirm their results with a second series of readings. Again, the neutron count registered about three times the norm. By that time, a second pair of scientists had rushed to the Sanctuary and made their way up to Base Camp to confer with their two colleagues. The four made no secret that, based on the results of the neutron

counter, they believed that there was a serious danger to human life. The air, they said, was probably heavily contaminated with radiation. As a precaution, they suggested wearing snow goggles and gloves while outside the tent, washing all exposed parts of the body with soap and hot water, and having all the climbers undergo an immediate medical examination.

Hearing of the inflated neutron count, intelligence officials in New Delhi pushed for an immediate and extensive search of G-14. A second counter had since been delivered, and both sets were taken to the search area on 5 October. This time, the results were even more baffling. The original counter now indicated some 2,570 counts per minute over a vast area of G-14. The new set, meanwhile, was showing only 225 counts across an equally large area.

This discrepancy confused the scientists. Given the sudden spike in readings from the original neutron counter—more than double the amount of radioactive particles that would actually be given off by the generator—it was probably defective. However, the second counter was also showing a higher-than-normal reading. Perhaps because temperatures had started to plummet on the moraine, the climate might be adversely affecting the mechanical counter.

Senior U.S. and Indian officials had been informed of the G-14 discovery and were screaming for confirmation of what was potentially a major environmental hazard. Reflecting the seriousness of the situation, two senior officials rushed to Base Camp on 9 October. One was Muttoo, the SFF officer who had headed the Nanda Devi search the previous year. Joining him was Dr. Krishnamurthi, a senior scientist from the Ministry of Defense and an authority on nuclear physics and the Chinese missile program; he was heading ARC's scientific section. Studying the two counters, they concurred that the mechanical registers on both were giving inaccurate counts due to the cold. As replacements, they brought two new

counters with attached tape recorders believed to be more forgiving of the low temperatures.

Carrying the new gear, Yonten and a pair of Sherpas hiked up to G-14 to begin the search anew. To their dismay, the tape recorders did not work as promised and quickly fouled in the low temperatures. The same frigid air had turned the ground hard as marble, frustrating the climbers when they tried to dig deep into the substrate to collect soil and rock samples. Failing in both their efforts, the climbers retreated back to Base Camp. The scientists made some field modifications to the neutron counters that night, and the climbers returned to G-14 on 11 October in a last bid to get an accurate reading. This time, the devices again showed an unbelievably inflated 2,000 counts per minute.

They were running out of ideas, so all the expedition members pulled back to the Sanctuary. Jay Horace, an American expert from the Atomic Energy Commission, had just arrived for discussions with Dr. Krishnamurthi. Reviewing the efforts of the previous days, they agreed that the defective neutron counters made a reliable investigation impossible. And since it was extremely late in the climbing season, it was decided to begin evacuating most of the equipment and nearly all the climbers. A large contingent of SFF porters had already arrived at the helipad to help in the process.

It was at that point that several men from the Nanda Kot mission were flagged for immediate deployment to the Nanda Devi project. On 14 October, Bhangu, Bhutia, two Sherpas, and Kohli staged through Gauchar on an Mi-4. Landing in the Sanctuary, they were greeted by a skeleton crew of Rawat, one of the Indian scientists, Jay Horace, and four Sherpas. Muttoo and Dr. Krishnamurthi shook their hands, then departed on the chopper.

None of them was happy to be there. The temperature was frigid, and light snow was starting to fall every day. As in years past, they were

pushing the envelope by remaining well past the optimal climbing season. They were also exhausted, having been on multiple missions since spring. Worse, they were told to stand fast and not resume the technical sweep until better equipment arrived.

Making the most of their time, Rawat led a party to establish a forward operating site closer to Nanda Devi. By that time, Base Camp had already been disassembled and packed away. In its place, they decided to pitch tents right atop G-14. As there were no more porters on hand, it took nearly a week for them to complete the necessary shuttles.

On 23 October, yet another pair of neutron counters—with repaired mechanical registers—was flown in by ARC chopper and taken by Jay Horace and his Indian counterpart to the G-14 camp that afternoon. New Delhi promised that these sets were properly calibrated and would work as advertised.

The following morning, both counters were taken out to the nullah. This time, their readings showed nothing out of the ordinary. They repeated the tests several times, and on each occasion, the counters barely flickered. Convinced that the generator was not there, they radioed the results back to New Delhi. The response was an order to pack up their equipment and prepare for withdrawal the following day.

These were welcome words, though Kohli could not help feeling discouraged by the course of the expedition. Between the unnecessary Questar search along the southeastern slope and the false signals emanating from G-14, the climbers had wasted almost two full months for naught. And they were still not finished. On the day of their planned evacuation, 25 October, the Sanctuary was hit by heavy snow. Hunkering down for an extra day, they prayed for clear skies. Kohli, sensing that this might be the last time he had the privilege of seeing Nanda Devi from that angle, kept venturing from his tent for a final communion with his surroundings; each time, he could see nothing beyond a few hundred feet.

The next morning, the Blessed Goddess showed some mercy. During a break in the weather, the first of four Mi-4 sorties landed at the Sanctuary helipad. Aside from Bhutia and six Sherpas, who headed back over the land route, the rest of them were in New Delhi by noon.

2. Department of State Airgram, subj: Communist China's ICBM Flight Test Program, dated 10 August 1967, p. 1.

1. U.S. Department of State Intelligence Note #323, Thomas L. Hughes to Secretary of State, subj: Chinese MRBM Deployment Delayed, dated 3 May 1968, p. 1.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Cathedral in Ice

The compound at Sandev was nondescript, and intentionally so. Once a two-room guest house, it had a spectacular panoramic view of the Himalayas. Apart from antennas poking from the roof and a nearby hill whose top had been lopped off to serve as a helipad, there was little to betray its role as the key relay facility receiving telemetry data collected on Nanda Kot. Cramped inside were shifts of Indian technicians who rotated back and forth from an adjacent bungalow residence.

The biggest challenge facing the technicians was boredom. Aside from noting regular signals sent from the Nanda Kot device to ensure that it was operational, there was little to do but sit and wait for a Chinese launch. For almost two months, the device diligently kept up its stream of signals. But suddenly near year's end, it abruptly went silent again.

Tucker Gougelmann, with only a few months left before his scheduled rotation out of India, was beyond frustration with the sensor's temperamental behavior. He suspected that heavy snow accumulation was again to blame, which, theoretically, could be rectified by having climbers hike to the Dome with shovels. But that would be only a temporary solution, and having climbers return to Nanda Kot every few months to remove snow was clearly not a practical arrangement. Moreover, the CIA was left blind during the downtime.

Gougelmann's superiors in Washington shared his frustration. The importance of having an operational sensor was underscored on 24 December, when China conducted its second nuclear test of that year. As during three of the earlier detonations, debris sampling showed evidence of thermonuclear fuel. Despite the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, Beijing

was clearly pressing ahead with its development of weapons of mass destruction.[1]

Kohli was called for a series of meetings with CIA and Indian intelligence officials shortly before New Year to review the problems with Nanda Kot. Once again topping their agenda was discussion of alternative sites. The emphasis this time was on selecting a peak not only sufficiently close to the border but also with easier access in order to better maintain or repair the device.

Given the new parameters, choices were limited. Anything east of Bhutan was discounted as too far from the missile test ranges. The mountainous northern border in Sikkim lacked accessibility. Much of the remaining frontier between Nepal and the contested state of Jammu and Kashmir was covered by mountains that would be just as challenging as Nanda Kot. But there was one possible exception. In the Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir, the terrain was broken by rugged peaks in the 18,000- to 20,000-foot range. Many of these were close to the Line of Control, the de facto border with China following the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict. Although this meant that Chinese posts were not far away, which could be a problem if the Chinese got wind of the presence of a sensor, the region was surprisingly accessible. In fact, the area around the district capital of Leh boasted the world's highest improved roads, at a staggering 18,300 feet.

To scout out possible sites in Ladakh, Kohli and Bhangu flew up to Leh at the beginning of 1968. Over the course of a week, they took a jeep in several directions. Eyeing the surrounding mountains, they mentally rated them according to likely climbing difficulty and distance from the road. Heading north toward the Khardung La pass, they saw what appeared to be several good candidates. Swapping notes with Bhangu, Kohli was pleased to see that they had zeroed in on the same peaks.

Back in New Delhi, they shared their observations with an assembly of American and Indian officers. The Leh vicinity, they said, was considerably

better than Nanda Devi or Nanda Kot in terms of accessibility. The difficulty, however, was the weather. Ladakh was indescribably cold in winter, and Kohli could not realistically foresee an expedition outside of the climbing season. His seniors listened and, thankfully, agreed. A mission to Leh would wait until later in 1968.

For the next few months, covert climbing fell off the CIA's agenda. In late March 1968, with his departure imminent, Tucker looked to leave on a high note by arranging for a forty-day survival course for senior officials from the various Indian intelligence and paramilitary organizations. This idea had been pushed by former intelligence chief Mullik back in 1965, but little had come of it.[2]

The venue for the course was Chakrata, the scenic mountain village that since 1962 had been home to General Uban's SFF. Part of the base had been cleared of the Tibetan commandos to make room for the attendees. The instructor was Joe Mazerowski, a tall, wiry American who had once taught at the U.S. Air Force survival school; among his students were the seven original Mercury astronauts.

On 8 April, a day before the course was to begin, Kohli and Bhangu flew up to Chakrata. They had been happy to secure two slots in the course and were reunited with numerous old friends from the SFF, ITBP, ARC, and SSB.

CIA survival instructor Joe Mazerowski (left) with Rawat and ARC officer M. K. Anand at Chakrata, April 1968. (Courtesy M. K. Anand)

From the opening day, Joe captured their attention. Wearing a trademark bush hat, he spent much of the first week reviewing the theory behind survival on the ocean, in the desert, in the jungle, and (tailoring his speech for India) at high altitudes. Joe was a good orator and was passionate about the subject matter. He also managed to inject plenty of anecdotes, especially about instructing the astronauts.

After theory came practical training. Located in a saddle on a ridgeline, Chakrata offered plenty of nearby forests and mountains to hone their skills. They learned how to craft nets and snares, as well as how to identify edible plants. Joe packed in as many topics as possible—everything from natural camouflage techniques to animal habits to food procurement and preservation. His favorite refrain was, “If it has four legs, and it’s not a chair, it’s edible.”

A final bloc of instruction covered traveling techniques. This was a wide subject, touching on map reading, river crossing, escape and evasion, methods of signaling, field medicine, and shelter construction. On a darker

note, he showed them three ways of silently killing. “To date,” admits Kohli, “I have not had occasion to use any.”

On the morning of 22 April, while they were still in the midst of the course, an Mi-4 circled over Chakrata and landed on the parade grounds. Kohli figured that it must be carrying a dignitary from New Delhi and did not give it a second thought. To his surprise, however, the camp administrator called him out of class and said that the chopper had come to rush him back to the capital. Fearing a family emergency, he demanded to know why this was necessary. The chopper crew said that they had come on orders of Mullik. Sonam Gyatso was critically ill at a military hospital and had expressed a desire to see him. Apparently, Sonam’s love of drink had finally taken a lethal toll on his liver.

Throughout the flight, Kohli looked out the window in a daze. Sonam, he knew, had lived life to the fullest. Among their small mountaineering clique, Kohli had been closest to him. “Beginning in 1959, we had together climbed one major peak a year for more than half a decade,” he said. “I had fed off his camaraderie and deep spirituality.” It was difficult to imagine Sonam as anything but a ball of energy. Even when ravaged by frostbite and somewhat past his climbing prime, he had reached deep within and, prayer flags fluttering from his pack, invariably surprised them all with his drive and determination. Even Mullik had taken keen note of this extraordinary Sikkimese and had regularly asked about him during their forays into the Sanctuary.

Landing in New Delhi shortly after noon, Kohli headed straight for the hospital. Ironically, Mullik was occupying a room in another hospital in New Delhi with a non-life-threatening ailment. The same, unfortunately, could not be said for Sonam. Entering his ward, Kohli looked at his friend and began to weep. Barely alive, Sonam’s robust frame looked frail and shrunken. His face, normally burned a rich chocolate from the strong ultraviolet rays at high altitude, was waxy and lifeless, the color drained

from his lips. His eyes were pinched tight, and his chest showed little sign of breath.

Next to the bed was Sonam's wife. The beautiful daughter of a prosperous nobleman from western Sikkim, she had managed to retain every ounce of dignity despite her inner pain. Sonam had been waiting for you, she told Kohli, but he had slipped into unconsciousness two hours earlier. The doctors thought it unlikely that he would open his eyes again.

T. M. Subramanian, the ARC officer who had worked closely with Tucker and the other CIA officers stationed in India, entered the room shortly afterward. Because Sonam had been given an eleventh-hour promotion to assistant director (equivalent to an army lieutenant colonel), Subramanian was there to pay the salary differential.[3]

As Subramanian spoke to Sonam's wife, Kohli leaned forward and touched his friend's hand. As if by a miracle, Sonam opened his eyes, leveled a distant stare in Kohli's direction, and feebly tried to lift his right arm. Pointing a finger at his wife, his eyes grew slightly more focused. "Look after her," Sonam whispered. He tried to say more, but nothing came out. His eyes and finger remained frozen, but his chest stopped moving.

"His Holiness Gyalwa Karmapa will accept you at his feet," said Kohli. Sonam is surely in a better place now, but he left a hollow spot in the hearts of those at his side.

While Kohli was away at the survival course, the CIA had been working on plans for the redeployment of a sensor to Leh. Before that could take place, however, the Americans wanted to bring down the nuclear generator from the nonfunctioning device on Nanda Kot.

There was much riding on the success of the Nanda Kot mission. They were all pretty sure that its silence was attributable to heavy snow and that it could be retrieved in relatively easy fashion. But in the less likely event that it could not be found, the CIA would almost certainly balk at positioning a new device with two others missing.

Leading the retrieval party were the three most capable climbers on their roster: Rawat, Bhangu, and Wangyal. They were supplemented by half a dozen of the best Sherpas, as well as a complement of SFF porters. No American mountaineers were deemed necessary.

Staging through Tejam at the beginning of May, Rawat was again bathed in hospitality from his hometown crowd. He and his men reached the peak without any problems and established both Base Camp and Advance Base Camp in short order.

As always, their greatest foe was the weather. With less than a month before the summer monsoons, they could ill afford any delays caused by unseasonal snows or anything else. If they missed their window, they would not have another shot until the monsoons subsided in autumn. So Rawat paid mind to the calendar but remained cautiously optimistic. As during the spring 1966 mission to Nanda Devi, he and his party were instructed merely to locate and bring back the generator; anything else would be nice, but not critical.

Moving up Nanda Kot as during the previous forays, the climbers made quick headway as far as the Saddle. The uppermost wall, they discovered, had changed considerably in the interim. The spring sun had baked off the outermost layer of powder, leaving behind a sheer, icy face that extended for more than 100 feet. The few outcroppings that had helped in previous ascents had slid off since their last expedition. With crampons and ice axes, they struggled to fix ropes up the wall. Not until a full two days later did they have the route complete.

Having surmounted the Saddle, the climbers then sited their final camp farther up than during the earlier missions. After a long night's sleep, they emerged from their tents just two days from month's end. With Rawat and Bhangu in the lead, they were soon standing on the Dome.

Nanda Kot was not cutting them any breaks, however. Looking around for signs of the device, they saw absolutely nothing. They walked the

Dome's circumference but found no visible marks or anomalies indicating an object under the surface. This was not totally unexpected. Given the speed with which the device had been buried in the fall of 1967 (after a single monsoon season), they assumed that it would be under even more powder after an entire winter and spring.

After discussing the situation with Bhangu, Rawat decided that they needed to bore some test holes. The Sherpas listened to the plan and immediately threatened to boycott the mission. They had come for a climb and bristled at the thought of a major digging project at high altitude. The Indian members knew that they had to handle the situation gingerly. Downplaying the likely difficulty of the effort, they cajoled the Sherpas into helping with an initial hole angled from the north. Together they began pulling away powder, but to no avail. Finding nothing, they halted for a rest.

Circling around to either side, they again performed some angled test digs. Again, they found nothing. By now, the Sherpas were on the verge of leaving in disgust. Begging them to stay, the climbers crisscrossed the top of the Dome with avalanche rods. They made a calculated guess and promised the Sherpas that they would dig just one more hole. If that failed, they would return.

This time, they got lucky. After shoveling a narrow six-foot hole in the center of the Dome, the bottom suddenly gave way into a void. Expanding the hole, Rawat descended with a flashlight. He was awestruck. The hole had bored into a spherical cavity at the heart of the Dome. The snow had been melted away in a five-foot radius, with the walls hardened into a crust from repeated melting and freezing. In the center of the cavity was the generator, sitting alone almost like a religious icon in a cathedral of ice.

Rawat could feel a wave of warm air emanating from inside the cavity. This gave him reason for pause, as he feared that radiation might have built up inside the hole. Emerging to confer with Bhangu, he noticed that the

Sherpas had taken several steps backward. Though they were normally more than happy to haul the toasty generator, they now feared descending into the claustrophobic chamber. But patriotism eventually overcame their anxiety. Spidering their way into the cavity, the climbers touched the generator and felt its aura of heat. They removed the device from its post and passed it up to the surface. Following the cables, they pulled out the antenna and a transceiver located just behind one of the walls of the cavity. The final transceiver, which was buried further inside the snow, was listed as lost.

While retracing their steps to Base Camp, the expedition members relayed a radio message to New Delhi. ARC had been waiting for their call and had an Alouette III helicopter on standby. With the Soviet-made Mi-4 showing its age, two of the French-built Alouettes had been procured by ARC the previous year. Heading up to Nanda Kot, the chopper landed at the helipad near Base Camp. Jay Horace, the nuclear expert who had been on the Nanda Devi search, stepped from the cabin, took the generator, and was airborne again in minutes.

Sam Currie was back in India, but the return was bittersweet. After the successful mission to place the device on Nanda Kot in the spring of 1967—for which Sam had won kudos at CIA headquarters—Tucker Gougelmann had requested that he return to the subcontinent. Tucker had a CIA air operations officer who was due to rotate home in early 1968, and with his aviation background, Sam seemed to be the perfect candidate to fill the slot.

Soon after he arrived in the Indian capital, however, Sam had second thoughts. On the climbing expedition, he had been fortunate to experience a fantastic adventure with a successful conclusion. The members from the two nations had bonded, without falling prey to the Cold War politics that motivated and frustrated their diplomats. But from his new seat in New Delhi, Sam was under far different pressures. By 1968, Indo-U.S. relations

were measured and often cold. The CIA's paramilitary presence, of which he was a part, was a vestige of the emergency assistance given in the immediate aftermath of the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict. Many Indian intelligence officers saw them as a tolerated annoyance. This was reflected in the restrictions placed on U.S. advisers. Although previous air operations officers had been posted at Bhubaneswar, the city in Orissa state that hosted the main ARC base, Sam was forbidden by his Indian counterparts to move to Orissa. "No white faces were allowed," he recalled. "We were closely controlled."[4]

With frustrations mounting, he took a brief home leave in the late spring of 1968. When he returned to the capital in the first week of June, his colleagues in the embassy had urgent news. "The gadget," they said, "is waiting at Bhubaneswar." Sam made two fast phone calls. The first was to his ARC liaison officer to arrange for a flight to Charbatia. The second was to B. N. Mullik. Although Mullik had been replaced as director general of security and had no official authority over the sensor project, he retained great unofficial influence. Recognizing this, Sam requested that he rendezvous at Bhubaneswar. In addition, the embassy had sent a cable to Washington calling for a special C-130 retrieval flight to come to India from Norton Air Force Base, California.

The following day, in a discreet corner of Charbatia, Sam and Mullik approached the generator. Mullik stepped forward, hands outstretched. "He touched the side," said Sam, "and felt its warmth as proof."[5] It was loaded into the C-130, and the plane taxied down the runway. One of the generators, at least, was off Indian soil.

During the summer of 1968, Kohli received word of his new posting as assistant inspector general of the ITBP. Balbir Singh, who had been named director general of security in January, had seen to this appointment, and Kohli was grateful to him. After spending most of the previous couple of

years away from home, he relished the opportunity to see more of his wife and boys.

His climbing colleagues did not have it as good. Lacking a sensor to eavesdrop on Chinese telemetry, the U.S. and Indian intelligence agencies were pushing for a new device to be positioned as soon as the monsoon ceased. Bhangu returned to Ladakh with three Indian technicians for a second reconnaissance, resulting in the selection of an 18,270-foot summit just nine miles northwest of Leh. Because a road was sited conveniently close, he managed to reach the top of the peak in August after a hike of less than a day.

All that remained was to get a device in hand for placement at the site. But word came from the CIA that the device—or rather the power source for the device—was not ready. Because of the past controversy over the nuclear generator, the CIA wanted to use a trio of gas-powered generators for the power supply. Not only would they erase the danger of radioactivity, but they could be easily serviced from the nearby road.

Since the Leh device was not available for positioning, the time was used to resume the perennial search for the missing generator at Nanda Devi. Though Kohli and most of his fellow climbers had given up hope of finding the device, some of their superiors were unwilling to call off the chase. In the fall of 1968, in the final weeks before the onset of winter snows, Rawat went through the motions of a helicopter search, limiting his efforts to an aerial survey of the slopes and moraine. After several days of straining through binoculars from above, he called it a season in late October and returned to the capital.[6]

The nuclear generator on Nanda Devi was lost, those of them in the know concluded, and the Blessed Goddess was not going to give it up.

6. Concerns over radioactivity were not limited to Nanda Devi. In September, Bhangu was ordered to lead a small party to Nanda Kot. He spent four days on the Dome taking recordings to ensure that no unusual

radioactive emissions were coming from the former location of the sensor. All readings were negative.

1. The test on 24 December was only ten kilotons, a fraction of the previous thermonuclear tests. Because of this smaller size and the fact that the Chinese refrained from their normal proclamations in the media, U.S. analysts suspected that the test had been a partial failure.

5. Ibid.

4. Currie interview.

3. Because he was officially on long-term assignment from the frontier constabulary, Sonam had been promoted according to the police rank structure.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Satellite Options

Not until November 1968 did the CIA have its gas-powered sensor available for placement near Leh, and the respective intelligence agencies made no secret of the urgency they felt in getting it to the peak immediately. This was a major problem, however, because it was already winter, and winters were especially brutal around Ladakh.

There was also a problem with available climbers. The two most reliable, Rawat and Bhangu, had just completed one of their busiest years to date. Between multiple reconnaissance trips to Leh, the retrieval at Nanda Kot, the helicopter search in the Sanctuary, and a brief September return to the Dome, they were both spent. When Kohli promised them a well-deserved rest for the remainder of November, they assumed that this would extend into the spring of 1969.

For Bhangu, this was not to be the case. In early December, he met with Dr. Krishnamurthi, head of the ARC technical wing, to finalize plans to place the device before year's end. Remarkably, Bhangu was being allotted just five other teammates to accomplish this tall order: two Indian technicians and a trio of Sherpas. Already, their three best Sherpas—Dawa Norbu, Tashi, and General Thondup—had been placed on standby for the mission.

On 10 December, Bhangu and his party departed New Delhi. Their gear, totaling thirty-five packs of rations and equipment, was placed in a pair of vehicles for a land journey as far as the ARC air base at Sarsawa. Two days later, with their supplies transferred to an ARC C-46 transport, they took a flight to Leh. The difference between the two locales was beyond words. Whereas Sarsawa had been pleasant—a morning chill, but comfortably warm in the afternoon—Leh was indescribably frigid. Snow whipped across the runway; the wind cut like a razor.

Met on the tarmac by officers from the ITBP, Bhangu was directed to the police barracks and urged to wait a week until the weather showed marginal

improvement. This he could not do—he was under pressure to conclude the mission as soon as possible—but he did get a bit of good news radioed from New Delhi. Two other climbers, Wangyal and Yonten (both Ladakh natives), had been added to the expedition and were scheduled to arrive the following day.

As promised, the two additions reached Leh on 13 December. Because the roads were clogged with snow, a jeep journey to the base of the targeted peak was no longer possible. Instead, Yonten spent the day scouring Leh for more than two dozen Tibetan ponies to carry their gear.

On 15 December, twenty-six ponies were on hand and loaded with equipment. Marching northwest out of Leh, they managed to reach the bottom of the peak and pitch a pair of four-man tents for Base Camp. A thermometer hung outside registered just five degrees Fahrenheit. With numb hands, General Thondup fired up his butane stove and boiled water for tea. “It was better than anything in the world,” remembered Bhangu.

After a rough sleep, the members woke to bad news. The temperature had dropped further, plummeting to minus four degrees by daybreak. This prompted Bhangu to reconsider the participation of the two technicians in their party. They were holding up reasonably well in their tents, but he feared that they might prove a liability on the slope. Should they seize up from the cold, he could not guarantee that they could be carried back from the summit. To avoid this potential problem, he decided to limit the ascent party to himself, Wangyal, Yonten, the two climbing Sherpas, and an ITBP porter who had accompanied them from Leh.

At 0915 hours, they left their tents with seven summit loads. Back in August, Bhangu had been able to cover the distance to the top in less than three hours. This time, their progress was slowed by large stretches of ice and massive snowdrifts. Not until 1500 hours—more than double the amount of time—were they standing atop the peak.

Though they had won the proverbial battle, they were losing the war. Frozen to the bone, the climbers could hardly function in the wind chill. After pitching a single four-man tent and erecting the antenna, their arms were too

deadened to attach the rest of the cables. In addition, a recorder inside one of the transmitters was apparently not functioning in the cold. With hands and feet no longer registering any sensation, they ditched their gear inside the tent and turned toward Base Camp.

Despite cups of Thondup's tea, the climbers were still dazed. Wangyal said that he had never experienced such raw cold; it was far worse than anything he had felt on Everest. It took nearly two hours for the circulation in their limbs to return to normal. "We were experienced mountaineers and kept our hands and feet moving," said Bhangu. "Had it been the two technicians, they would have suffered frostbite for sure."

The experience left them more than a bit shaken. Both Bhangu and Wangyal felt that they should abandon the operation or else risk losing some fingers—or worse. Installing equipment in midwinter, they concluded, was folly. After composing their thoughts, they radioed a status report back to Dr. Krishnamurthi. The weather was not cooperating, they noted; during all of 17 December, they could not leave their Base Camp tents for more than ten minutes at a stretch. The doctor listened and was sympathetic. The following morning, he approved their request to move back to Leh. But there was a catch: they had to return to the summit and remove the gear left behind.

Reaching deep into their energy reserves, the same summit party left their tents at 0900 hours. The temperature had dropped to an incredible minus thirty-one degrees, making each step a painful effort. Every breath caused icy air to slice at their lungs. And upon reaching the top, they were pummeled by the wind. While the three climbers dismantled and packed the sensor gear, the Sherpas tore down the tent and stuffed it into sacks. One made the mistake of touching metal without his glove and left a layer of flesh affixed to the spot. After a grueling thirty-five minutes of work, they were on their way toward the base.

Huddling at camp, the members of the expedition were depressed. Their mission had been a bust and probably had never stood much of a chance of success. Determined to salvage something of value from their effort, they

exchanged additional messages with Krishnamurthi and agreed to assemble the antenna closer to Base Camp in order to field-test the equipment.

The next morning, after some liberal swigs of brandy and rum, the climbers exited into the chill. The thermometer was still showing minus seventeen degrees, but the combination of alcohol and a slight drop in the wind gave them a psychological boost. By noon, they had the antenna up and the generator running. Heartened, the members stayed for another day to test the gear. The two technicians reported that they were able to record some radio signals from the antenna, validating the system and location.

Though this was good news, the moment was fleeting. On 21 December, Base Camp was hit by the coldest temperatures to date. With no further reason to remain, the team received approval from New Delhi to move back to Leh. Yonten rushed to town to hire two dozen Tibetan ponies, and the remaining climbers and Sherpas spent the day packing their gear. The next morning, the beasts of burden arrived as scheduled. By day's end, the expedition members were resting at the infinitely warmer ITBP compound.

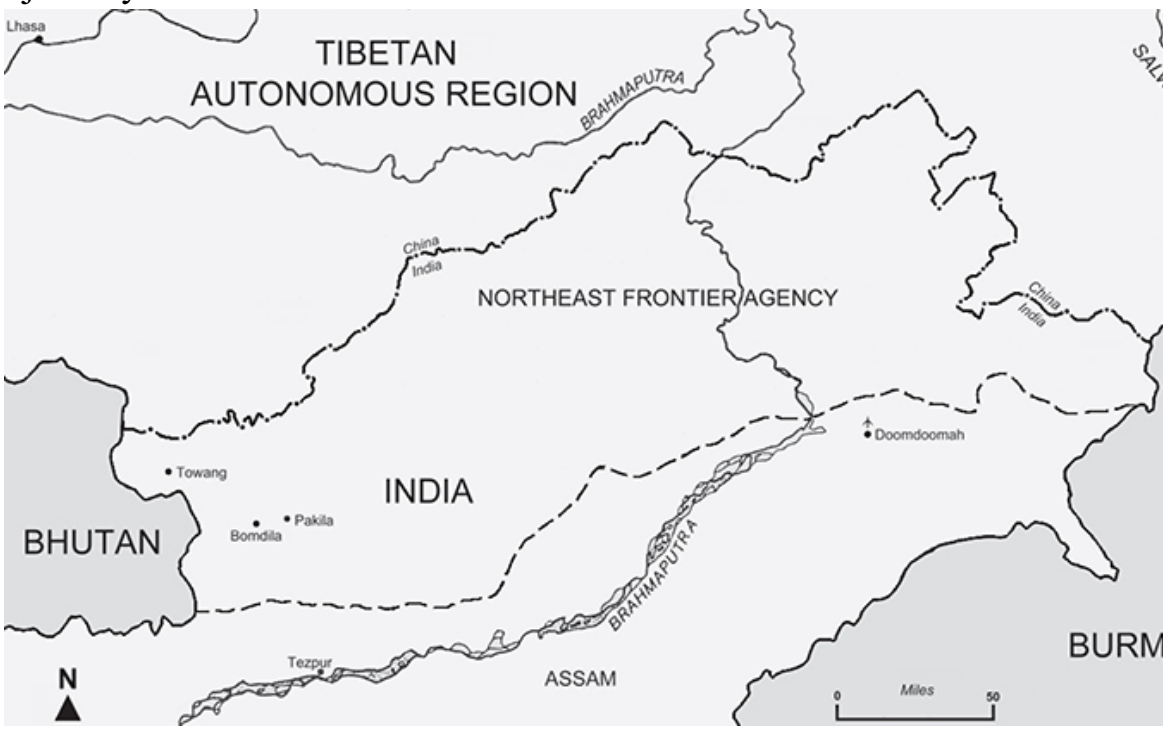
In March 1969, Bhangu was back at Leh, leading a renewed effort to place the monitor on the nearby mountaintop. Over the ensuing winter, the CIA had made further improvements in the sensor package, replacing the three gas engines with a sophisticated solar-cell battery to provide power. This would negate the need to return to the site to replenish fuel stocks.

Bhangu traveled by jeep from the ITBP compound to the mountain, and the mission turned out to be surprisingly easy. Gone were the numbing winds and snowdrifts of December, allowing for an almost routine climb to the summit. An antenna was quickly erected on top, from which cables led to the solar cells and transmitters installed near the road head. After a few cursory checks with the technicians at Sandev—who confirmed that they were receiving a signal—Bhangu and his men returned to the capital.

Bolstered by this success, the CIA immediately shipped a sister device to India. Because China's newest generation of intercontinental missiles might be test-fired in a southeasterly direction toward an impact zone in the Bay of Bengal, the U.S. and Indian intelligence agencies now wanted a second sensor

capable of reading telemetry from any rockets flying over India's eastern border.

This region—then known as NEFA, now as Arunachal Pradesh—was rife with suitable peaks. Unlike the Sanctuary and Ladakh, these mountains were surrounded by steamy jungles reaching high along their slopes. Rather than traditional climbing expeditions with crampons, ice axes, and parkas, a mission in these reaches demanded jungle boots, fatigues, and insect repellent for much of the journey.



Leading the effort was Sohan S. Mahal, a joint assistant director in the Intelligence Bureau. Mahal was not a newcomer to the project; on and off for the past few years, he had manned the relay station at Sandev. Taking leave of this relatively relaxing post, he shuttled to Bomdila, a small town in western NEFA near the border with Bhutan. Bomdila had gained a modicum of fame two decades earlier when the Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet took him through Bomdila, where two Indian government representatives had been waiting to greet him. Coincidentally, A. K. Dave, the head of ARC who had overseen several of the sensor missions, had been one of those representatives.

Venturing east of Bomdila, Mahal found a prominent hilltop known as Pakila that was deemed sufficiently high and secure—two army battalions were posted nearby. A helipad was cleared on an adjoining hill, and from there, the second solar-powered device was lifted in and installed by late spring.

The positioning of the two telemetry collection posts came at an opportune moment. Back in November 1965, President Johnson had tentatively approved a recommendation from his national security advisers to establish alternatives to existing intelligence facilities in Pakistan. Due to growing tension in U.S.-Pakistani relations, American officials feared that Islamabad might eventually revoke U.S. permission to maintain intelligence facilities on Pakistani soil.

The centerpiece of the U.S. intelligence effort was a major base on the southwestern outskirts of the city of Peshawar. Administered by the U.S. military, it was an atypical American outpost; it even had its own PX and dependents' quarters. Bristling with antennas and radar dishes, it was focused on both the Soviet Union and China. Although it was not in the best position to receive telemetry from Chinese missile tests (thus necessitating the Himalayan sensors), a certain amount of information from China could reach the Pakistan-based devices.

The Peshawar facility dated to a period of warm bilateral relations between the United States and Pakistan. A ten-year agreement to operate the center had been signed in July 1959 during the Eisenhower administration. But with the 1960 election of John Kennedy, who was seen as pro-India, the relationship deteriorated appreciably. By 1965, with Washington heaping criticism on Pakistan for renewed fighting in the Kashmir, U.S. officials saw little chance of extending the Peshawar lease.

President Johnson agreed with this assessment and in May 1966 approved the search for alternatives. Among the possibilities was increased intelligence cooperation with India and Iran. To cover Chinese intercontinental missile tests, shipborne sensors placed in the Bay of Bengal were also considered. Johnson, however, never really gave up hope of salvaging the relationship with Pakistan. In July 1968, with the agreement to use the Peshawar communications facility expiring in exactly a year, he penned a letter to Pakistani leader Ayub Khan and

asked for an extension; short of that, he requested a reasonable withdrawal period to lessen the impact of its loss.[1]

Three days later, Ayub responded with a letter of his own. Permission was denied; the facility was to be closed by the summer of 1969.

To make up for the imminent intelligence shortfall out of Pakistan, the United States scrambled for new ways to peer into China. One of the methods was Operation Heavy Tea, a joint covert project between the CIA and the air force from the Republic of China on Taiwan. In September 1968, a twelve-man air force crew was quietly taken from Taiwan to the United States and trained in dropping sensors from a C-130 transport. Nine months later, the crew returned to the Republic of China with a single unmarked transport. From there, it ventured to a secure CIA compound at Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand. On the night of 17 May, the plane, under the command of Major Huang Win-lu, departed Takhli on a course toward China's nuclear testing sites around Lop Nor. Flying just 1,500 feet off the ground, the C-130 managed to mask itself along the mountainous terrain. No communist countermeasures were encountered as the aircraft approached two locales about five miles apart. In the rear, a pair of crew members dropped dozens of javelin-like seismic sensors, each of which promptly buried itself into the arid landscape. These would send back signals when a nuclear test took place. After a total of thirteen hours in the air, the C-130 was safely back in Thailand.[2]

A separate intelligence-collecting project once again brought together the CIA and Indian climbers. In mid-1969, Rawat and Bhangu were ordered to visit NEFA and climb a 16,000-foot hill overlooking Chinese-occupied Tibet. Rather than eavesdropping on missile telemetry, their mission this time was tied to a joint covert operation with the CIA, code-named Gemini, aimed at listening in on Chinese telephone conversations on the Tibetan plateau. Four SFF commandos had been trained in the installation of electronic impulse probes, a sophisticated kind of wiretap buried in the ground underneath elevated phone lines. These taps then automatically relayed conversations across the border to India.

After hiking for nearly six days, Rawat and Bhangu found a suitable site. Farther east of the Pakila telemetry sensor placed by Mahal, the two climbers set up a solar-powered monitoring station angled toward the Tibet wiretaps. Gyan Singh, the same ITBP radioman who had saved Kohli from drowning, oversaw Gemini from the lowlands. The system worked well for a year, after which Rawat and Bhangu were forced to return to replace the malfunctioning solar-powered batteries. Another year after that, the project was abruptly stopped when two SFF commandos were captured during a wiretap placement foray. The Chinese then began shifting their telephone lines farther away from the border.

Perhaps a bit late, the Indian intelligence services attempted to expand and formalize their mountaineering capabilities. In January 1970, a High Altitude Operations Training Center (HAOTC) was formally opened under the command of Rawat. It was headquartered at Sandev, the same location as the telemetry relay post. Rawat was assisted by several of the Nanda Devi veterans, including Bhangu, Sisodia, and Wangyal. All these climbers were formally absorbed into the rolls of the various paramilitary organizations under Director General of Security Balbir Singh. The center would handle all future mountaineering projects tasked by Balbir and would also maintain an inventory of specialized climbing equipment to support such operations.[3]

Bhangu was the first to get an assignment under this new arrangement. In early 1970, a decision was made to close the Sandev collection station and shift the post to Leh. Given the high altitude, extreme cold, and heavy snow, this promised to be a hardship post of the highest order. Bhangu, who had just received the President Police Medal for his distinguished service over the years, was chosen to head the effort.

To make life at Leh more bearable, an expansive base was built. With a total of twenty living quarters, the facility surpassed the local army headquarters in terms of comfort and size. The only difficulty was keeping a fresh supply of water, which had to be hauled from streams near the Khardung La pass.

From Leh, Bhangu diligently oversaw the tedious months of waiting between rocket launches. The Chinese medium-range ballistic missile program

had made significant strides in the interim, with a two-stage Dong Feng 4 successfully launched in January 1970 and the extended-range Dong Feng 5 lifting from the test range in September 1971. Snippets of telemetry from these tests reached Leh, but none was considered particularly insightful.

Then came 1973. That year, an improved Dong Feng 5 lifted into the sky, and as it arched west, the atmospheric conditions were perfect. At Leh, the technician on duty nearly fell from his chair as the sensor plucked pristine data from the sky. When the information was relayed back to New Delhi and Washington, intelligence officials were ecstatic. After years of trying, the sensor project had finally provided a wealth of sensitive information. Mullik, feeling vindicated, pulled strings and arranged for the Leh technician to be promoted on the spot.

Ironically, the success at Leh came just as the India-based telemetry sensors were about to be declared obsolete. The reason: satellites could do the mission better. The technology for this had been long in coming. Back in June 1962, the United States had launched its first space-based electronic intelligence satellite. Code-named Ferret, it was limited to a single successful launch. Theoretically, it was capable of listening in on telephone calls and missile telemetry, but in reality, it gave Washington barely any worldwide coverage.

Six years later, an improved communications intelligence satellite, code-named Canyon, took to orbit. One additional Canyon was launched in each of the three succeeding years. This was a vast improvement in coverage, but Canyon still lacked the ability to be in the right place at the right time.

This changed in June 1970 when the first Rhyolite satellite was launched from Cape Canaveral. With a seventy-foot parabolic antenna, Rhyolite had an extraordinary ability to pick up a wide swath of conversations from regular telephones, car phones, and walkie-talkies, as well as missile telemetry. A second Rhyolite was launched in March 1973, doubling the system's considerable abilities.

The result was a high-technology "ear" listening in on China from above, far exceeding the ability of the small antennas on the manpacked sensors in the

Himalayas. After all the years of toil and sweat, the mountaintop devices the climbers had slaved to install had gone the way of the dinosaur.[4]

4. Operation Heavy Tea was also superseded by satellite coverage. In 1970, a second Chinese aircrew was secretly trained in the United States, but its sensor-placement mission was scrubbed due to overhead coverage by satellites. Huang interview.

3. The HAOTC's background was protracted and confused. In 1963, the Intelligence Bureau had formed a Mountaineering Institute under Sonam Gyatso in the Sikkimese capital of Gangtok. But when Mullik left the bureau and assumed the position of director general of security, he sanctioned in September 1965 a new mountaineering school to be formed at Gwaldam, a town near Sandev. The Gwaldam facility was supposed to train cadre from Mullik's paramilitary units—the SFF and SSB, for example—whereas the Gangtok school would cater to the Intelligence Bureau. Three years later, the Gwaldam school had yet to run its first course. In an effort to consolidate the two and avoid redundancy—and especially with Gwaldam showing no progress—there was a 1968 proposal to expand the Gangtok school and have the director general of security foot a quarter of the bill. This ran afoul of the bureaucrats, who insisted on two separate institutes. In February 1969, Kohli proposed that HAOTC be established at Sandev. Superseding the stillborn Gwaldam concept, HAOTC would fall under the auspices of the director general of security and would train members of the SSB, ARC, and SFF. In January 1970, after almost a year of bureaucratic delays, Rawat shifted to Sandev to formally open HAOTC.

2. Interview with Huang Win-lu, 24 September 1999. The Republic of China air force code-named the project Chi Long, Mandarin for "Super Dragon."

1. Ayub Khan, General S. S. Uban, and M. S. Kohli all hailed from Haripur and studied at the same school.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Media Blitz

Repercussions from the covert climbs, both positive and negative, continued for decades. In early 1968, the four U.S. climbers on the successful Nanda Kot mission—Corbet, Frost, Prather, and Schaller—were invited to CIA headquarters in McLean, Virginia, and given medals of appreciation. Awarded, too, was Gordon Sleeper and another CIA technician who had manned the Sandev relay facility when the sensor went operational. To maintain secrecy, the climbers' medals were immediately taken away and placed in a CIA vault.

The following year, Nanda Kot case officer Sam Currie, who had just completed a one-year tour as the CIA's air operations adviser in India, was beckoned for an audience with CIA director Richard Helms. The director presented Currie with the Intelligence Medal of Merit, the agency's fourth highest award. "With deep appreciation for a job well done," Helms wrote on the bottom of a commemorative photograph.[1]

Among the Indian climbers, Rawat and Bhangu remained busy with the HAOTC at Sandev. They were supported by seven of the best Sherpas from their Sanctuary missions, who had been given full-time positions on the SSB roster during 1970. Wangyal was selected to command the training center at Gangtok that had been founded by Sonam (it had, appropriately, been renamed the Sonam Gyatso Mountaineering Institute). Sadly, Gyan Singh, who had saved Kohli from drowning in 1967, died four years later while climbing a peak south of Nanda Kot.[2]

As for Kohli, he had been serving as assistant inspector general of the ITBP since 1968. By 1971, he was looking for a different career path and had the opportunity to meet with B. N. Mullik, who suggested that Kohli move to the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India's external

intelligence organization that had been created in 1968. Intentionally patterned after the CIA, RAW assumed control over all foreign operations previously handled by the Intelligence Bureau, and the bureau became responsible only for domestic matters. Included in the RAW mandate was oversight of the director general of security, who had control over the ARC, SFF, and SBB. R. N. Kao, the sophisticated and unflappable former ARC director, was named the first RAW chief.

Sam Currie receiving the Intelligence Medal of Merit from CIA Director Richard Helms, 1969.

After his meeting with Mullik, Kohli spoke directly with Kao about suitable jobs. It was immediately decided that he would be sent (with a fictitious name) to Kathmandu under diplomatic cover. The very next day, however, Kao recanted the offer, deciding that Kohli's identity was too well known in Nepal (due to his climbing expeditions) to allow for an effective and inconspicuous RAW assignment.

At that point, Kohli sought counsel from A. K. Dave, who many years earlier had succeeded Kao as the director of ARC. Dave had remained with the Intelligence Bureau rather than transfer to RAW. Though there were rumors that he would eventually assume the position of director of the Intelligence Bureau, Dave's reputation as a strong-willed and independent thinker irritated Indira Gandhi. There were also hints that pro-Soviet members in the Gandhi regime, of which there were many, had labeled him as having the incorrect political pedigree. The end result was that Dave was given a lackluster command over a police training center, which he correctly interpreted as a slap in the face. He characteristically refused the transfer and resigned in April 1972. As a silver lining, he managed to land a prominent position in India's hotel industry.

During Dave's inspection visits to the Sanctuary, Kohli had gotten to know him well and valued his insights. And when Kohli asked for his advice this time around, he did not disappoint. Why not take a position with Air India? he suggested. Kohli rushed a letter to the airline's general manager in Mumbai and had an interview within days. When he was offered a choice managerial slot, he told Pushpa and the kids to start packing.

For the next five years, Kohli served with Air India in Mumbai. During that time, the director general of security (Kao assumed this position, as well as serving as RAW chief, when Balbir Singh retired) decided to open the Sanctuary to climbers and trekkers after an eight-year hiatus. It did not take long for climbing associations around the world to respond. First out of the gate was the Himalayan Alpine Association of Japan, which readied itself for a small expedition into the northern Sanctuary during 1974. Their mission was highly successful, including several ascents of northern peaks for the first time in four decades.

In 1975, the focus shifted to Nanda Devi itself. A joint Franco-Indian team took on the challenge, with two of the Indians managing to reach the

summit. Two expeditions were scheduled in 1976. One of them, again by Japanese climbers, reached the summits of both Nanda Devi and Nanda Devi East. The second was clouded in tragedy. Led by Adams Carter, the editor of American Alpine Journal and a member of the successful 1936 Anglo-American expedition to Nanda Devi, the team included famed Everest summiteer William Unsoeld and his daughter, Devi Unsoeld. Named after the mountain they were about to tackle, Devi had spent much of her life in Nepal and was beloved by the Sherpas. At Camp Four, however, she collapsed, perhaps from dysentery complicated by altitude sickness, and died. Her body was committed to the snows.

To that time, word of the covert sensor missions had been kept from the media. But all that was about to change.

Because all the Indian mountaineers on the secret expeditions were in some way affiliated with the government, their silence was enforceable. The same held true for the CIA case officers on the project. But that was not necessarily the case for the U.S. civilian mountaineers, whose confidentiality agreements lacked legal punch. And with a total of eleven American climbers brought into the project since the 1965 practice run in Alaska—not to mention the dozens of dependents, friends, and coworkers whose interest had been piqued by their prolonged absences—it was perhaps only a matter of time before the story went public.[3]

The first strong whiffs of a CIA nexus in the Himalayas emerged in 1975. This coincided with the first U.S. expedition attempting to summit K2, the second tallest mountain in the world and located on Pakistan's border with China. The mission was ultimately a failure due to extremely hostile weather. But when the team members returned to the United States, they were pelted with harsh criticism not because of their inability to reach the top but because of reports of squabbling among themselves and alleged friction with their Pakistani hosts. Linked to this, a prominent member of the American Alpine Club, Alex Bertulis, began to spread rumors that the

team had gone to Pakistan on a CIA-sponsored mission to place a monitoring device. The charge was completely unfounded, although those in the know noted that one of the Nanda Devi veterans, Rob Schaller, happened to be on the K2 expedition. The reason for the rumor, it turned out, was a personal feud. Bertulis had been dropped from the K2 team due to a spat with a fellow member. Apparently, he had heard hints of the Indian sensor missions and was intent on smearing the rival who had cut him from the K2 expedition.[4]

Worse was yet to come. During the months the K2 mountaineers had spent in Pakistan, Rob Schaller, who was still a Seattle surgeon, had been swapping stories with fellow team member Galen Rowell, who also happened to be an acclaimed photojournalist. Rowell had already heard the Nanda Devi rumors and, as an editor for American Alpine Journal, had even written a story that touched on the CIA's interest in climbing. During the K2 climb, said Schaller, Rowell pressed him for more details about the sensor missions.[5]

In early 1978, the United States prepared for a second attempt at K2. Even before the climbers departed America, Bertulis, who had again failed to land a berth on the team, began circulating rumors that the latest expedition had been organized and funded by the CIA. Just as the Seattle Times was preparing to run with the story, a law firm retained by one of the team members threatened the paper with a libel suit, and it dropped the article.[6]

At the time, charges of CIA missions in the Himalayas were largely confined to the climbing elite. On 12 April 1978, however, the story suddenly and unexpectedly reverberated around the world. Howard Kohn, an associate editor of Rolling Stone magazine who had written on environmental and nuclear issues in the past, broke the news with an exposé in the May edition of Outside magazine. The Outside article was flawed, however. Although Kohn claimed to have spoken with "eight of the

fourteen [sic] mountaineers . . . and three sources in the U.S. intelligence community," it appeared that the bulk of his information had been passed by Rowell from hearsay gleaned during the K2 mission.[7] The result was some questionable conclusions and multiple errors of fact. Among his more alarmist observations was that the sensor could pose a "radioactive menace for centuries." He also claimed that the search for the Nanda Devi device had been given up after a "short-term feckless effort" and that the CIA had insisted that India's "Central Intelligence Bureau" keep the affair secret from Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

The Kohn story came at a particularly sensitive time in Indian political history. By 1975, three years after her peak of power, Gandhi was seriously faltering due to her inability to forge a coherent and effective domestic program. Although poverty was a fast-growing scourge, she appeared to be interested primarily in retaining her seat. Against this backdrop, opposition politicians gathered behind the Janata Party and pushed for national elections in 1976. Gandhi's reaction was brutal. Proclaiming a state of national emergency in June 1975, she jailed most of her challengers. The Soviets supported her move, but Washington did not.

When Jimmy Carter won the election in November 1976, he indicated that he would take a firm line against nuclear proliferation (India had detonated its first nuclear device in 1974) and human rights, including India's shift toward dictatorship. Just a week before Carter assumed office in January 1977, Gandhi did the unexpected. Releasing thousands of political prisoners, she scheduled general elections for March. The result was an unexpected landslide in parliament for the opposition coalition. Morarji Desai, at the unlikely age of eighty-one, became India's fourth prime minister.

Once installed in New Delhi, the new Janata government was generally more friendly toward the United States than its predecessor had been. Positive messages began to emerge from both capitals, and Carter

named Princeton University president Robert Goheen, born in India of missionary parents, ambassador to India. When Carter himself visited the country that fall, the rhetoric was positive.

Under the surface, however, Desai was under pressure. Much of his coalition had been united only in their opposition to Indira Gandhi, and it soon began to fray. Gandhi herself, more politically astute than ever, started plotting a comeback. And Desai proved to be as much of an economic nationalist as Gandhi had been, largely negating an expected surge in foreign investment.

The media, too, saw Desai as an easy target. For years, the Soviets had supported a number of prominent journals and newspapers. When the new prime minister attempted to enforce a more genuine nonaligned foreign policy, rather than Gandhi's left-leaning one, the pro-Soviet chorus grew shrill. Even some of India's respected and independent journalists were prone to instinctively take aim at Washington.

This was the powder keg that the Kohn article lit. Almost instantly, Indian journalists seized on the angle of the "evil hand" of the CIA. One Mumbai weekly long known as a Soviet mouthpiece, Blitz, used some of the most fiery rhetoric. Not to be outdone, its journalistic rival Current ran a ludicrous front-page story claiming that Sir Edmund Hillary, the beloved New Zealander who had been the first to scale Everest, was a CIA agent.[8]

As the opposition bloc in parliament began to squeeze the issue for political mileage, Desai had no choice but to respond. As a first step, Ambassador Goheen was summoned to the foreign office, and he conveyed the word that the State Department was looking into the matter. On 17 April, Desai ventured to parliament and gave a brief account of the operation. He confirmed that one device had been lost in a blizzard, another had operated successfully for a year, and water samples had shown no contamination. At no point did he mention that China was the target of the

operation. He further noted that there was little, if any, possibility of radioactive pollution reaching unsafe levels.[9]

Realizing that this would not assuage his political opponents, Desai made a proposal. A committee of top scientists would be appointed to study and assess the problem to make "triply sure" that radioactivity was not a threat. A preliminary report from this committee would be issued in three months. Desai also called for immediate steps to obtain water samples from the upper reaches of the Rishi Ganga.

These measures barely had an effect. A shouting match ensued in parliament's lower house, prompting the house speaker to respond, "The Himalayas are not going to be ruined in a day."

Clearly, the issue was not going to fade away any time soon.

Kohli watched all this transpire from Sydney. After five years in Mumbai, he had been transferred to Australia as the Air India station manager covering Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand. The Australian press was full of accounts about the CIA mission because, coincidentally, Australian National University had sent a team to India for a summit attempt on Dunagiri, a peak on the Sanctuary wall. The team was about to leave for Joshimath when the story broke, causing observers to question whether the team members would be safe from radioactivity.

By the first week of May, Kohli's phone began to ring. Khuswant Singh, the high-profile editor from India's Illustrated Weekly, requested an exclusive account, perhaps suspecting that Kohli had been involved in the Sanctuary missions. Kohli feigned ignorance and cut the conversation short.[10]

Later that week, Kohli received a telex that could not be ignored. The principal secretary to Desai was asking for an immediate audience, wrote his Air India bosses in Mumbai. A ticket was booked, and he was in the prime minister's outer office on 10 May.

In the interim, the media onslaught had gone into high gear. One respected commentator focused on the false allegation in the Kohn article that a frustrated American team member had assaulted an Indian intelligence officer. This was a reminder of the contempt the CIA had toward its Indian counterparts, the commentator wrote.

Kohli was extremely frustrated by all this. Though Kohn's charge about the assault had no basis in reality, the damage being done to bilateral relations was very real. And he was personally hurt by accusations that the Indian mountaineers were CIA agents. "We were confirmed patriots to the man, and our participation was because of India's key strategic interests," he said. "By coincidence, those interests happened to coincide with those of the U.S. in this instance."

Ushered before the prime minister, Kohli began an extensive, albeit belated, debriefing. Because he did not have ready access to notes kept during the climbs, he was forced to rely on his memory. Remaining in New Delhi, Kohli typed out a written report on 18 May. He concluded with two likely scenarios about the fate of the missing device. His gut feeling was that it had hit the snowfields softly and landed intact on the glacier. By now its heat would have caused it to sink to the very bottom of the glacier, making it impervious to detection from the current generation of alpha and neutron meters. The less likely possibility was that it had hit a rock on the fall, broken apart, and been strewn across the glacier. If that were the case, however, he was pretty sure that at least some debris or radioactivity would have been detected during their search missions.

Over the next two months, the seven-man scientific committee compiled its findings. Among the seven were such prominent names as Raja Ramuna, the man most responsible for India's first nuclear explosion in 1974, and M. G. K. Menon, who later became minister of state for science and technology. In the interim, several significant events had taken place. First, Indian intelligence officials had found in their files a letter sent

to Indira Gandhi soon after she took over as prime minister. In the letter, she had been informed of the sensor missions in the Himalayas; significantly, she had never voiced any opposition to the project. This debunked the charges in the Outside article that the CIA had intentionally kept the climbs a secret from Gandhi. Indian intelligence officials privately testified that Lal Bahadur Shastri, under whose brief administration the climbs had started, had also been informed of the operation.

From Kohli's confidential debriefing, as well as from some of the other climbers on the missions, the government also learned of the extensive but fruitless efforts to find the missing sensor. Far from giving up early, as Kohn had insinuated, they had gone the distance in their search attempts.

As this was transpiring, RAW quietly dispatched Rawat to Nanda Devi in mid-June to make yet another visual inspection of the southwestern front. By coincidence, an American expedition had departed by foot into the Sanctuary just as the controversy became public. Rawat boarded a chopper and was whisked to the Sanctuary, posing as the Indian Mountaineering Foundation's "liaison officer," just as the team members were about to scale the peak. With the Americans unaware of his true role, he made his way up the slopes during midmonth. Keeping his eyes fixated along the sensor's likely path of descent, he saw nothing.[11]

In July, the committee's preliminary findings were delivered as promised. Containing both laymen's summaries and technical charts, the ninety-four-page report made a compelling case to mute the genuine fear, as well as the associated political hype. Although the plutonium fuel in the generator had received much publicity as a highly toxic substance, the scientists repeatedly offset fear with fact. While the Pu-238 isotope was particularly deadly when inhaled in micron-sized particles, under most conditions, such as consumption of contaminated food and water, plutonium was less toxic than many other radioactive substances. In fact,

the permissible concentration of plutonium in soil and water was much higher than that of other common isotopes.[12] The committee also noted that Pu-238 was not a fissile material. Thus, the generator fuel could not lead to an explosive chain reaction like a conventional nuclear device could. Noted, too, was the fact that the most recent silt and water samples collected from the upper reaches of the Rishi Ganga in April, like those collected periodically through 1970, showed no contamination.

Reviewing all the possible forms of contamination of air, water, and food under different accident conditions, the committee concluded that the overall risk was extremely low. The possibility of extensive air contamination was deemed most unlikely, with the probably of toxic levels being reached set at three in ten million. Regarding water contamination, a flow of 5,000 gallons a day—far surpassed along the Ganges system—would dilute any potentially dissolved radioactive materials to safe drinking-water levels.

These relatively tame scientific findings, plus the opposition's realization that Indira Gandhi could be viewed as a hypocrite for criticizing a project to which she had lent implicit approval, took most of the wind out of the issue. Working its way off the front page, and then out of the papers entirely, the story rightly died a quiet media death.

7. Rowell apparently cooperated with Kohn in researching the Outside exposé and was bitter when it appeared under only Kohn's byline. In a 14 October 1997 correspondence with the author, he wrote: "I [will not] bore you with the breach of trust that occurred . . . and how all my research on the mountain end came to be published under Howard Kohn's name."

6. Wickwire and Bullitt, Addicted to Danger, p. 99.

5. Schaller interview.

4. Jim Wickwire and Dorothy Bullitt, Addicted to Danger (New York: Pocket Books, 1998), p. 74; Galen Rowell, In the Throne Room of the Mountain Gods (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), p. 313.

9. Desai's full speech is reprinted in the appendix.

8. "CIA Agent Hillary Planted Death Trap," Current, 22 April 1978, p. 1. Various publications would float similar rumors for years to come. In December 1998, a British daily claimed that the CIA had tried to hire British climbers from a May 1970 Annapurna expedition to put sensors in Nepal. One summiteer had been quizzed about the suitability of Annapurna, claimed the story, and had been offered large sums of money for photos of the peak.

12. The final report of the committee was issued in April 1979. The introduction to the report is reprinted in the appendix.

11. By coincidence, the first liaison officer to the U.S. expedition had fallen on the lower slopes of Nanda Devi and perished on 13 June. Rawat was choppered in to take his place.

10. Blitz, the pro-Soviet tabloid out of Mumbai, wrote in its 22 April 1978 edition (p. 22) that three of the Indians on the Nanda Devi operation were Kohli, Sonam Gyal Su [sic], and H. C. Ram. They were correct about the first two.

3. Some of the U.S. mountaineers took their oath of confidentiality very seriously. In the 1980s, Sam Currie was in a Denver department store when he chanced upon Barry Corbet, who had been involved in a helicopter accident and was confined to a wheelchair. When Currie began to reminisce about their 1967 mission, he found Corbet reluctant to broach the subject.

2. The HAOTC at Sandev was eventually closed after less than a decade of operation; the Sonam Gyatso Mountaineering Institute remains open to this day.

1. Tucker Gougelmann, the longtime CIA paramilitary chief in New Delhi, would die under tragic circumstances. He left India for a second tour in South Vietnam and later quit the agency to go into private business; he had interests in both Thailand and Vietnam. In 1975, he was attempting to rush back to Saigon in the days before the communist advance to evacuate his common-law Vietnamese wife and their children. Unable to catch a flight in the mayhem, he was captured by the communist authorities, who interrogated him and ultimately determined his CIA past. His bones, bearing the hallmarks of torture, were later repatriated to the United States and interned at Arlington National Cemetery.

EPILOGUE

Nanda Devi would again be closed to the public, but this time due to environmental concerns rather than national security considerations. By 1980, a number of naturalists had accompanied the climbing and trekking teams making their way into the Sanctuary. Their findings were unanimous: the region's unique and encapsulated flora and fauna were suffering serious degradation.

When Kohli heard this, he was not particularly surprised. Their classified expeditions to Nanda Devi had had the benefit of dozens of porters and helicopter airlifts, enabling them to focus considerable attention on picking up their refuse and leaving behind little evidence of their presence. Other expeditions without such support invariably left their garbage behind to lighten their loads on the march out of the Sanctuary. Given the small size and enclosed nature of that ecosystem, the effect from even a small amount of trash was pronounced.

Taking heed of the naturalists, the government of India formally declared the Sanctuary a national park in 1982. From that point forward, it was closed to all climbing expeditions and trekkers. The entire Sanctuary, including the outer flanks of its walls on all sides, was placed on the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's list of World Heritage Sites in 1988.

This did not faze die-hard climbers, however. For years to come, applications to climb in the Sanctuary were forwarded to the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. During his tenure as the foundation's president from 1989 to 1993, Kohli received dozens of such requests from foreign and Indian teams. All were firmly rejected.

There was a loophole of sorts, however. In 1993, in celebration of the Golden Jubilee of the College of Military Engineering, the Indian army's Corps of Engineers got permission to mount a scientific and ecological

expedition to Nanda Devi. Ostensibly, they were to document the diversity of flora and fauna, assess the impact of the park's decade-long closure, and clean up accumulated junk from past teams. Besides army engineers, the expedition included scientists from the Wildlife Institute of India.

The mission entered the Sanctuary as planned that year. Besides completing its assigned tasks, it also managed to put five climbers on the summit of Nanda Devi. And on the way out, the expedition members brought almost a ton of rubbish with them. Upon the team's return to New Delhi, a reception was hosted by the chief of engineers, Lieutenant General Visheshwar Kapoor. Kohli was invited to the event, which featured tables filled with the refuse removed from the Sanctuary. Most of it was standard climber's fare—empty butane jars, hundreds of plastic food wrappers, rusting carabiners—but as his eye landed on one particular piece of trash, his heart stopped. It was the olive-drab box used to bring the seven plutonium capsules into the Sanctuary.

The color drained from Kohli's face. He immediately placed a call to the chief of the ITBP, who in turn notified the director of ARC, the home secretary, and the cabinet secretary. Word ricocheted around the community, and the box was whisked away to check for radioactivity. Tests proved negative. Almost immediately, there was talk of starting the search effort anew. Neither Kohli nor any of the other members of the 1965 operation were involved in these discussions.

Not until 1 November was Kohli asked to accompany the director of ARC on a flight to Mumbai. From there, they drove to Trombay, on the outskirts of Mumbai, and had detailed discussions with A. N. Parshad, director of the Bhaba Atomic Research Center. Discussions continued that afternoon with Dr. R. Chidambaram, the center's chairman.

In the course of these talks, Kohli made his position clear. The olive-drab box, he stressed, had been used only to bring the plutonium canisters to the mountain. Once the transfer to the generator had been made, the

empty box had been kept at Base Camp for subsequent removal with the rest of the trash. He speculated that a porter or Sherpa had balked at its bulk and threw it into a gully in order to lighten the load at the end of the mission. This was supported by the testimony of the engineers, who said that they had found the box between Base Camp and the Sanctuary helipad.

With regard to the generator, Kohli went over old ground. He firmly believed that it had reached the glacier and melted its way to the rocky bottom. As they had found on Nanda Kot, the heat from the capsules would keep the ice at bay for at least six feet in all directions. As a result, there would be no pressure on the generator itself, allowing it to remain unmolested in this icy cathedral for several hundred years until the nuclear pellets died down.

In a report he submitted three days later, Kohli stated that no further action was warranted. The scientists and intelligence officials agreed, as did the cabinet secretary. At long last, the issue was declared closed.

APPENDIX

Statement Made by the Indian Prime Minister to Parliament, 17 April 1978

Mr. Speaker, Sir,

Honorable members are quite understandably exercised over the reports that have appeared in the Press here on a news item which appeared [in] the United States about the attempt to locate a nuclear-fuelled power-pack on the heights of Nanda Devi. The failure in this attempt has raised just apprehensions about the possibility of contamination of the waters of our sacred river Ganga. I can assure the House that all of us share this concern of the Honorable Members as well as by the people at large at the possible hazard to our environment and people.

The House is aware that as soon as these reports came to our attention, we expressed our grave concern to the U.S. authorities and have subsequently been in touch with them in New Delhi and in Washington. We have also made thorough enquiries at our end to obtain as complete details as possible in the last few days. In the light of the international situation prevailing at that time and scientific developments which were taking place both far and near, it was decided by the Government of India and the Government of the United States of America at the highest level that a remote sensing device with nuclear power-pack should be installed near the highest point of Nanda Devi with the object of securing information about missile developments. Accordingly, a mountaineering expedition manned only by Indian mountaineers went up the Nanda Devi followed by a Joint Indo-American expedition scientifically equipped with the device with a view to installing it at a height of 25,000 feet.

When the expedition was approaching the summit, it was overtaken by a blizzard which made further ascent impossible and facing fatal hazards to the party, they were obliged to retreat to the lower camp at a height of

23,000 feet. In the precipitate descent under very trying and exacting conditions they had to leave the power-pack securely cached. With the onslaught of winter, no attempt to locate and retrieve the device was immediately possible and had to be postponed. Another expedition was mounted in May 1966, that is in the following spring, with the intention of retrieving and installing the device; however, the expedition party on arrival at the area discovered that a major avalanche had occurred around the area and the device could not be located. Every attempt was made by ground and aerial search aided by supersensitive scientific equipment to trace the power-pack but these efforts proved in vain. After all such attempts, the conclusion reached by our experts, which included scientists, was that if the power-pack had broken, it would have been detected through these means and the likelihood was that the device got buried deep somewhere after having been smothered or carried into a neighboring crevice by the avalanche. Searches both on the ground and by helicopters were organized every year over a wide area and continued till late 1968 but without the equipment being sighted or detected by scientific means.

Simultaneously, samples of the water were taken up to 1970 and were under observation for some years but no trace of contamination was detected.

In 1967, a new device was taken to the same area and was duly installed on a neighboring peak. This functioned normally for a while but was removed subsequently in 1968 and the equipment was returned to the United States. These operations, as I said, were apparently carried out predominantly by Indian personnel but under joint auspices and were in the know of and with the approval at the highest political level of the Government of India at that time.

After the news reports appeared a few days ago, we have assembled relevant details and backgrounds of these expeditions with reference to

available records and in consultation with both the U.S. Government and the Indian Departments who were involved in this project.

We have tried to get as much technical information about the device as was possible. According to the obtained and published literature on the subject, the device comprises the power system energized by 2 to 3 pounds of plutonium-238 metal alloy which is contained in several doubly encapsulated leaktight capsules. The inner capsules enclosing the plutonium are made of 20 mil thick tantalum—a refractory metal. The primary function of tantalum is to inhibit corrosive action of the plutonium fuel. The outer capsules are of Nickel alloy having high strength and temperature resistant properties. The capsules are encased in a Graphite heat block which, along with the thermoelectrical modules, in turn is encased in a cylindrical aluminum casing which is 14 inches in diameter and 13 inches high. The total weight of the entire assembly was 38 pounds.

According to the records, it is clear that at that time all aspects of safety, including the possible hazards to the operating hands and general public, were taken into account and conclusion was reached that no undue hazards existed. The tests, which have been carried out by the United States, indicate that even under extremely unlikely conditions of complete instantaneous fuel exposure to water, there is little, if any, possibility of pollution attaining unsafe limits. We understand that even in such an unlikely eventuality, a flow of 5,000 gallons per day would itself dilute the dissolved material to safe drinking water levels. It is also believed by scientists that the danger of pollution on instantaneous exposure to air are also minimal. In brief, they claim that the design details and protective systems are such as to ensure the maximum possible safety against splintering and consequential contamination and environmental hazards.

Notwithstanding the safety factor in the design and the results of physical search and scientific detection now that our Government’s attention has been drawn to it, we are making renewed efforts to make

ourselves triply sure. It is proposed to appoint a committee of scientists to study and assess the problem and with the help of all possible expert advice, to recommend such further action as may be considered necessary to safeguard against future hazards to the environment and to the people. We have taken immediate action to obtain fresh samples of the water from the upper reaches.

As I mentioned, we have been in touch with the American Government. The U.S. authorities had provided technical details, scientific co-operation and sophisticated equipment at the time when the search operations for the missing power-pack were being made in the summer of 1966.

Mr. Speaker, I can recall the critical situation with which we were faced during those days of concern, apprehension and anxiety. The authorities concerned in India at the highest level assessed the situation in terms of certain precautionary and effective devices to identify the various threats and contingencies and decided upon the measures which I have outlined above. It is clear from the records that as far as human agencies could provide against hazards, they were taken into account. It is unfortunate that nature intervened to present for the future as we now find it, a continuing source of apprehension and anxiety.

However, as far as I see, no cause for alarm on grounds of health environmental hazards exists. The indirect evidence so far is that the safety precautions built into the pack may be as effective as has been claimed and if so pollution effects may not take place in the future. It is gratifying that none have been detected so far. I would also like to assure the House that to our knowledge, no other device of this kind exists on Indian soil and such operations which carry potential national hazards would not be permitted by us.

Report of the Committee

In response to a call attention motion in the Lok Sabha, the Prime Minster made a statement on 17 April 1978. In his statement, the Prime Minister said, “Notwithstanding the safety factor in the design, and the results of physical search and scientific detection, now that our Government’s attention has been drawn to it, we are making renewed efforts to make ourselves triply sure. It is proposed to appoint a committee of scientists to study and assess the problem, and with the help of all possible expert advice, to recommend such further action as may be considered necessary to safeguard against future hazards to the environment and to the people. We have taken immediate action to obtain fresh samples of the water from the upper reaches.”

Accordingly, the Government of India, by their Notification No. 1/1/3/78-CF dated 4 May 1978, set up a committee consisting of:

1. Dr. Atma Ram, Chairman
2. Dr. H. N. Sethna
3. Prof. M. G. K. Menon
4. Dr. Raja Ramanna
5. Dr. V. Ramalingaswamy
6. Prof. A. K. Saka
7. Shri K. T. Thomas, Secretary

“to study and assess the problem and with the help of all possible expert advice, to recommend further action as may be considered necessary to safeguard against future hazards to the environment and to the people.”

A note giving a historical background of how the plutonium device—the radioactive thermoelectric generator (RTG)—was left on the slopes of Nanda Devi and the subsequent efforts made to locate and retrieve the same is given in Annexure-3. This account is based on the reports made at that time by the climbers and others involved in the expedition in 1965 and in the search operations during 1966–69 and on the official records of the period 1965 to 1969.

THE DEVICE

From the information and data made available by the U.S. authorities and other information gathered from literature, the Committee noted that the nuclear powered device (RTG) is of SNAP 19C (Systems for Nuclear Auxiliary Power) type, capable of continuous output of 40 watts of electricity for a period of two years. This type of thermoelectric power generator, based on heat generated during radioactive decay, can be used at remote locations where unattended operations are required for long periods of time. They have been used to power remote meteorological stations, light sources of buoys, remote radio-thermal stations, electric and electronic equipment of satellites, etc. This device is fueled with an alloy of plutonium and zirconium (Pu-Zr). The plutonium was mainly Pu-238, with about 18 percent of Pu-239 isotope as an impurity.

Some of the salient features of SNAP 19C are given below:

Total weight of (Pu-Zr) alloy	1,900 gms
Total weight of Pu-238	1,386 gms
Total weight of Pu-239	348 gms
Total plutonium content	1,734 gms
Total radioactivity content	about 23,500 curies
Total radioactivity content per capsule	3,360 curies

The fuel was divided in seven capsules; each capsule was given an inner cladding of tantalum (0.5 mm thick) with sufficient void space for accumulation of helium gas. The heavy-walled outer cladding of the capsule was of a 2.5 mm thick alloy—Haynes-25; this alloy is composed of nickel, cobalt, chromium, and tungsten, and possesses high temperature and corrosion resistant properties as well as high structural strength. The fuel capsules were installed in a hexagonal graphite block along with other accessories like thermocouples, thermal insulation material, etc. The whole assembly was encased in a cylindrical aluminum shell with a number of fins

for heat dissipation. Detailed technical description of the device is given in Annexure-4. The Committee was informed by the U.S. authorities that the integrity of the fuel capsules and of the device were ensured by adopting stringent fabrication procedures and subjecting it to various test procedures. Annexure-5 Part A gives details of tests reportedly carried out by the U.S. authorities on the radioactive power generator involved in our discussion. The conditions of some of these tests are more rigorous than those required by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) which are given in Annexure-5, Parts B and C.

WORK OF THE COMMITTEE

The committee studied the relevant material available, held discussions with the persons concerned with the project and with specialists in fields of relevance to the problem. Details relating to the device (including that of the fuel), the environment including geohydrological details, attempts at installation and of retrieval, the routes taken, the varying climatic conditions at site, etc. were analyzed in sufficient detail. The Committee took into consideration the results of analysis of samples carried out from 1966 to 1970 and in early 1978 (Annexure-6). The general features of the Nanda Devi region and of the site where the nuclear device was lost are given in Annexure-7.

On the basis of the account given by two members of the original mission, one of whom was the leader of the search party, and after examining the routes with the help of slides presented by the latter, maps and other materials, and after detailed discussion, the Committee felt that the following could have occurred:

The device could have fallen on the southwest face of the mountain.

Though damaged outwardly as a result of the fall from where it was left, it could still be intact.

It could have been buried in the glaciers in the mountain.

It could have been buried in the debris on the slopes of the mountain.

It could have fallen into the mountain streams and finally reached the gorge of Rishi Ganga.

As a result of multiple impacts during the fall the device might have been very badly damaged/disassembled and thus scattered all over, in which case the radioactive material would have got released into the environment.

A detailed hazard evaluation was done in relation to the above possibilities. Details of this study, covering both credible and incredible accident conditions, are given in Annexure-8 (A to G). Annexure-9 gives a summary of the evaluation.

DISCUSSION

The Committee has outlined in Annexure-3 the details of the efforts made to search and locate the device using a variety of techniques including ground and aerial visual searches as well as through the use of metallic mine detectors, neutron counters, alpha counters and infra-red detectors. These searches yielded negative results. The possibility of using other methods of detection—aerial survey with sensitive infra-red detectors and other techniques—were also discussed. The Committee feels that since the device still remains undetected and unretrieved, it is in the public interest that monitoring should be systematically carried out on the water and cross sectional samples of sediment and clay in the river beds and water courses and allied environmental elements in the locality, flora, and fauna in view of the possibility of disintegration of the device. Further, the techniques for the detection and retrieval and facilities for such work should be enhanced at laboratories and institutions in the country. All these require great skill and sophisticated equipment especially in the handling and analysis of Plutonium and efforts to devise improved techniques on a laboratory and field basis are recommended. It is obvious that physical location of the device and taking possession of it is the most obvious way of setting at rest

all apprehensions related to it and continued thought should, therefore, be given to this problem.

The Committee has examined (Annexure-6) the various efforts to sample the environment at selected sites (water, sediments and soil) for radioactive contamination due to failure in the integrity of the package through impact, corrosion or other causes. All these studies carried out during 1966 and later until 1970, have yielded no indication of radioactive contamination. More recently, in April 1978, samples of silt and water from locations from the Upper Ganga and also from the Sharada River have given no positive results for radioactive contamination in the waters and soil. On the basis of these studies the Committee noted that there has been no indication of any radioactive contamination arising from the device.

The Committee had gone into details concerning the various possible conditions which could result in a break up of the device. Eight possible hypothetic conditions were examined. Six of these were considered as having some possibility of occurring (termed “credible”), whilst the remaining two were considered to be of extremely low possibility (termed “incredible”). These possibilities have been discussed in detail in Annexure-8A.

Plutonium has received wide publicity as a highly toxic substance. It is particularly toxic under conditions of inhalation of micron sized particles. Under other conditions of uptake through food and water, the toxicity of plutonium is lower than many other radioactive substances. Indeed the permissible concentration of plutonium in soil and water are much higher compared to many other common isotopes. For example, the permissible concentration of plutonium-238 in water is 500 times higher than that of the permissible concentration of naturally occurring radium-226. This characteristic of plutonium is due to the extremely low solubility of plutonium in water and to the fact that it binds strongly to soil. Its transfer coefficients from soil to vegetation and vegetation to man are extremely

small. As a result of this fixation process any such contamination due to plutonium will be highly localized.

The Committee also considered the question of build-up of radioactivity with time, particularly with regard to Pu-236 and Am-241. This build-up results from impurities present in Pu-238 at low concentrations. It was evaluated that no additional hazard would result from such radioactivity build-up.

Our examination of the possible hypothetical conditions indicates that none of the so-called "credible" accident conditions can lead to air-borne contamination due to plutonium.

Taking all factors into account, the Committee evaluates that the radiation hazards arising from plutonium release from this device to the public at large are negligibly small in magnitude and should not be a matter for alarm.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the viewpoint of further action related to this matter the Committee recommends that:

1. Due to the loss of the device, considerable alarm has been created among the public. The Committee recommends a program of monitoring the environment on a continuing basis should be undertaken, to watch for radioactive contamination of any significance. The exact location of the sampling sites, quantity and number of samples to be taken, the frequency of sampling, the laboratories to undertake analysis, the analytical procedures to be adopted and the approach to consider the various results obtained, may be worked out by a specialist committee appointed for the purpose. Monitoring should be of all elements of the environment (air, waters, local flora and fauna as well as of soil and cross sectional samples of sediments in the water beds). Also it is essential to ensure that all authentic information about the possible release of radioactivity to the environment and resulting in a hazard to the public, is made available as rapidly as possible. On the basis of such information, prompt and appropriate measures should be taken.

2. Study of possible new techniques for location of the device may be pursued, in laboratory and field conditions and applied for a search of the device in the relevant areas. For this purpose it is recommended that a committee of specialists may be appointed by the Government to decide on the methodology and the agency/agencies to carry out this work.
3. If the device has not as yet disintegrated, it would mean that a concentrated source of radioactivity untraced so far, is lying buried somewhere. This is different from the situation encountered in nature where radioactive materials exist in widely dispersed form, for example, uranium, thorium deposits, etc., and also from concentrated radiation sources which are kept under safe custody. One is dealing here with an unusual situation. Even so, this untraced large radiation source does not constitute a hazard unless it is disturbed or disintegrated. There is a possibility even though very remote, that just by chance or while performing some specific task (e.g., excavation work) one may come across it; and not knowing what it is, try to examine it or break it. In the event of this happening, the person or persons doing so would be liable to severe radiation hazard.

As a measure of precaution to prevent any person who may come across the device and try to examine or break it without realizing attendant consequences of severe radioactive hazard, it is recommended that the local authority/authorities of the area may, by suitable methods but without creating a sense of panic, keep the population [in] the surrounding area informed (this is not particularly difficult, since the number of villages and number of inhabitants of the concerned area are not large), that if anyone comes across or sees an object with a given broad description/type, he/she should not tamper with it, but should immediately inform the local authorities, who will ensure that it is taken into custody.

NOTES

1. Almost Heaven

1. National Geographic, vol. 119, no. 6 (June 1961).

2. Bishop related the cocktail party story to fellow climber Dan Wolfe. Interview with Dan Wolfe, 5 October 2000.

2. Convergent Minds

1. Though not officially promoted to two stars while in the military, Uban's position as inspector general with the Tibetan commandos was deemed equivalent to the rank of major general; when he unofficially conferred this rank on himself, there was no opposition.

2. Interview with M. K. Anand, 11 February 2001. Anand attended CIA paramilitary training in 1963; three years later, a CIA adviser qualified him as India's first free-fall parachutist. He went on to set a national free-fall record (25,000 feet) and was leader of the Indian Army–Air Force skydiving team that took part in the 1976 International Skydiving Championship at Tula in the Soviet Union.

3. On paper, the ITBP was a central police formation under the Home Ministry. However, in a testament to his wide-ranging powers, Mullik and his Intelligence Bureau directly supervised the ITBP for its first few years.

4. Memorandum, General Maxwell D. Taylor, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Chinese Nuclear Development," 18 November 1963, on file at the National Archives, Record Group 218, Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Chairman's files (Maxwell D. Taylor), box 1, CM-1963; General Curtis LeMay, Acting Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, to Secretary of Defense, "Study of Chinese Communist Vulnerability," 29 April 1963, RG 59, Records of Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of the Country Director for the Republic of China, Top Secret Files Relating to the Republic of China, 1954–65, box 4.

5. Memorandum, Lt. General John K. Gerhart, Deputy Chief of Staff, Plans & Programs, U.S. Air Force, to Air Force Chief of Staff Thomas White, "Long-Range Threat of Communist China," 8 February 1961, Library of Congress, Thomas White Papers, box 44, Air Staff Actions; William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson, "A Chinese Puzzle," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (1997).

6. Interview with R. N. Kao, 21 March 2001.

7. Given Indian reluctance to attempt more U-2 flights from Charbatia, the CIA was again faced with the problem of finding a suitable spy plane launch site within range of Xinjiang. In the fall of 1964, when a Chinese atomic test was thought imminent, the agency received permission to stage a single aircraft from Takhli air base in Thailand. To add plausible deniability, it was to be flown by a Nationalist Chinese aircrew. Although the U-2 was at Takhli by late September, it had yet to fly its first mission by the time the Chinese detonated their first device on 16 October. Because a Xinjiang overflight was then considered less pressing, the U-2 returned from Takhli to Taiwan in early November, taking it over several southern Chinese provinces en route. At that point, India reconsidered its ban and in December allowed a single CIA-piloted U-2 to briefly stage from Charbatia. Interview with Li-Yi "Jack" Chang, 7 March 2001.

8. Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), East Asia edition, 16 October 1964, p. BBB1.

9. "History of the Air Force Technical Applications Center, 1 July–31 December 1964," chap. 3, pp. 11, 12, 27.

10. "China as a Nuclear Power (Some Thoughts Prior to the Chinese Test)," 7 October 1964, prepared by the Office of International Security Affairs, Department of Defense.

11. China had an active guided-missile program since about 1958. With Soviet assistance (prior to the Sino-Soviet schism), the Chinese constructed a missile test range head at Shuang-cheng-tzu in Gansu. The

missile impact zone was in the deserts of Xinjiang. “CIA report, subj: Science and Technology in Communist China,” 28 January 1966, Declassified Documents Reference System (DDRS), #0606-1998, p. 7.

12. Kao interview.

13. “CIA report,” DDRS, #0606-1998, p. 6. There was an unfounded claim in the Japanese media that the second Chinese device had been delivered by a missile; this was officially denied by Beijing on 17 May. See FBIS, East Asia edition, 18 May 1965, p. CCC1.

14. Interview with Gil Blinn, 17 September 2000.

15. Frost’s Yosemite climbs are detailed in Steve Roper, Camp 4 (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1994).

16. Interview with Harthon Bill, 9 October 2000.

17. Interview with Robert Schaller, 30 August 2000.

18. Journalist Howard Kohn claimed that the U.S. and Indian mountaineers trained for the mission at a CIA facility at Harvey Point, North Carolina. This is unfounded. Howard Kohn, “The Nanda Devi Caper,” Outside (May 1978), p. 27.

3. McKinley

1. Interview with Arthur Davidson, 21 August 2000.

2. Davidson interview; Dan Wolfe interview; Bill interview.

4. Nanda Devi

1. Interview with S. K. Bajaj, 16 June 2000.

2. Interview with James Rhyne, 29 April 1998.

6. Camp Four

1. All parts of the sensor and generator were lifted to Camp Four, with one exception. A small internal component of the generator, considered particularly delicate, was kept by Lute at Camp Three.

7. Nanda Devi Redux

1. “China Explodes H-Bomb,” The Statesman, 10 May 1966, p. 1.
2. Interview with James Critchfield, 9 November 1999.
3. Interview with Don Stephens, 14 April 2000.
4. Interview with Alan Wolfe, 28 April 2000.
5. Interview with Tom Fosmire, 22 June 1997.

8. Mutiny

1. Viewed as an extremely diplomatic, measured personality by his peers, Hooja had been a loyal deputy to Mullik since the latter’s days as director of the Intelligence Bureau. Mullik had wanted Hooja to succeed him as intelligence director, but this would have entailed leapfrogging over the more senior Balbir Singh. Instead, Mullik maneuvered to have Hooja assume the post of director general of security in July 1966 (even though Mullik retained considerable influence over the paramilitary projects). In 1968, Mullik was finally successful in having Hooja elevated to intelligence director.
2. Bill interview.

9. Moraine Camp

1. Kohn claimed that in 1966 the CIA devised and implemented an ingenious solution to find the lost device. Piecing together several lengths of rubber hose, said Kohn, the expedition members were able to put the intake near a mountain stream and then divert water to wash away snowy debris at the base of Nanda Devi in order to uncover the generator (“Nanda Devi Caper,” p. 28). This tale is completely fanciful.
2. Schaller interview.
3. Ibid.
4. FBIS, East Asia, 28 October 1966, pp. CCC1–CCC2.
5. Ibid., 30 December 1966, p. CCC1.

10. Nanda Kot

1. Interview with Wayne Sanford, 21 November 1998; interview with Sam Currie, 24 February 2000.

2. Correctly noting that McKniff had come under criticism for the missing generator, Kohn ("Nanda Devi Caper," p. 28) claimed that mounting tension in India prompted some of the U.S. mountaineers to confront CIA and Indian intelligence officers, even to the point of getting into a fistfight with an Indian operative and berating the head of the Intelligence Bureau. This is completely false; the relationship between Indian and American participants in the mission—both climbers and intelligence officers—remained warm throughout the entire project.

3. When the SFF doubled in size, the Intelligence Bureau for the first time approved the inclusion of ethnic groups other than Tibetans. Notably, about 500 Gurkhas were accepted into its ranks. However, because the Tibetan majority strongly protested this ethnic dilution, the Gurkhas were segregated into a subordinate unit (known as G Group), which was limited to base security and administrative duties.

4. Currie interview.

11. The Dome

1. Foreign Relations of the United States, vol. 25, South Asia, Document #428, "Telegram from the Embassy in India to the Department of State," 28 March 1967.

2. When the photos were later shown to the director of the CIA, he reportedly wanted to know what "AMF" meant. Interview with Woodson Johnson, 27 November 1998. Johnson was a CIA paramilitary adviser in India at the time.

3. According to Kohn ("Nanda Devi Caper," p. 29), the CIA technician at Sandev was forced to use Man-Tan, a cosmetic cream that simulates a suntan, in order to remain inconspicuous among his Indian colleagues.

Gordon Sleeper scoffs at this. “I never used it. My only hardship was no haircut for three months.” Correspondence with Gordon Sleeper, 16 September 2001.

12. Whipsawed

1. U.S. Department of State Intelligence Note #323, Thomas L. Hughes to Secretary of State, subj: Chinese MRBM Deployment Delayed, dated 3 May 1968, p. 1.

2. Department of State Airgram, subj: Communist China’s ICBM Flight Test Program, dated 10 August 1967, p. 1.

13. Cathedral in Ice

1. The test on 24 December was only ten kilotons, a fraction of the previous thermonuclear tests. Because of this smaller size and the fact that the Chinese refrained from their normal proclamations in the media, U.S. analysts suspected that the test had been a partial failure.

2. In March and April 1965, two small escape and evasion–survival courses had been run for key staff of the paramilitary units under the authority of the director general of security. On 8 August 1965, Mullik formally sanctioned a survival training cadre to be formed at the ARC base in Orissa. However, no further courses on this topic were conducted prior to the class held at Chakrata in 1968.

3. Because he was officially on long-term assignment from the frontier constabulary, Sonam had been promoted according to the police rank structure.

4. Currie interview.

5. Ibid.

6. Concerns over radioactivity were not limited to Nanda Devi. In September, Bhangu was ordered to lead a small party to Nanda Kot. He spent four days on the Dome taking recordings to ensure that no unusual

radioactive emissions were coming from the former location of the sensor. All readings were negative.

14. Satellite Options

1. Ayub Khan, General S. S. Uban, and M. S. Kohli all hailed from Haripur and studied at the same school.

2. Interview with Huang Win-lu, 24 September 1999. The Republic of China air force code-named the project Chi Long, Mandarin for "Super Dragon."

3. The HAOTC's background was protracted and confused. In 1963, the Intelligence Bureau had formed a Mountaineering Institute under Sonam Gyatso in the Sikkimese capital of Gangtok. But when Mullik left the bureau and assumed the position of director general of security, he sanctioned in September 1965 a new mountaineering school to be formed at Gwaldam, a town near Sandev. The Gwaldam facility was supposed to train cadre from Mullik's paramilitary units—the SFF and SSB, for example—whereas the Gangtok school would cater to the Intelligence Bureau. Three years later, the Gwaldam school had yet to run its first course. In an effort to consolidate the two and avoid redundancy—and especially with Gwaldam showing no progress—there was a 1968 proposal to expand the Gangtok school and have the director general of security foot a quarter of the bill. This ran afoul of the bureaucrats, who insisted on two separate institutes. In February 1969, Kohli proposed that HAOTC be established at Sandev. Superseding the stillborn Gwaldam concept, HAOTC would fall under the auspices of the director general of security and would train members of the SSB, ARC, and SFF. In January 1970, after almost a year of bureaucratic delays, Rawat shifted to Sandev to formally open HAOTC.

4. Operation Heavy Tea was also superseded by satellite coverage. In 1970, a second Chinese aircrew was secretly trained in the United States,

but its sensor-placement mission was scrubbed due to overhead coverage by satellites. Huang interview.

15. Media Blitz

1. Tucker Gougelmann, the longtime CIA paramilitary chief in New Delhi, would die under tragic circumstances. He left India for a second tour in South Vietnam and later quit the agency to go into private business; he had interests in both Thailand and Vietnam. In 1975, he was attempting to rush back to Saigon in the days before the communist advance to evacuate his common-law Vietnamese wife and their children. Unable to catch a flight in the mayhem, he was captured by the communist authorities, who interrogated him and ultimately determined his CIA past. His bones, bearing the hallmarks of torture, were later repatriated to the United States and interned at Arlington National Cemetery.

2. The HAOTC at Sandev was eventually closed after less than a decade of operation; the Sonam Gyatso Mountaineering Institute remains open to this day.

3. Some of the U.S. mountaineers took their oath of confidentiality very seriously. In the 1980s, Sam Currie was in a Denver department store when he chanced upon Barry Corbet, who had been involved in a helicopter accident and was confined to a wheelchair. When Currie began to reminisce about their 1967 mission, he found Corbet reluctant to broach the subject.

4. Jim Wickwire and Dorothy Bullitt, Addicted to Danger (New York: Pocket Books, 1998), p. 74; Galen Rowell, In the Throne Room of the Mountain Gods (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), p. 313.

5. Schaller interview.

6. Wickwire and Bullitt, Addicted to Danger, p. 99.

7. Rowell apparently cooperated with Kohn in researching the Outside exposé and was bitter when it appeared under only Kohn's byline. In a 14 October 1997 correspondence with the author, he wrote: "I [will not] bore

you with the breach of trust that occurred . . . and how all my research on the mountain end came to be published under Howard Kohn's name."

8. "CIA Agent Hillary Planted Death Trap," Current, 22 April 1978, p. 1. Various publications would float similar rumors for years to come. In December 1998, a British daily claimed that the CIA had tried to hire British climbers from a May 1970 Annapurna expedition to put sensors in Nepal. One summiteer had been quizzed about the suitability of Annapurna, claimed the story, and had been offered large sums of money for photos of the peak.

9. Desai's full speech is reprinted in the appendix.

10. Blitz, the pro-Soviet tabloid out of Mumbai, wrote in its 22 April 1978 edition (p. 22) that three of the Indians on the Nanda Devi operation were Kohli, Sonam Gyal Su [sic], and H. C. Ram. They were correct about the first two.

11. By coincidence, the first liaison officer to the U.S. expedition had fallen on the lower slopes of Nanda Devi and perished on 13 June. Rawat was choppered in to take his place.

12. The final report of the committee was issued in April 1979. The introduction to the report is reprinted in the appendix.

Since the Leh device was not available for positioning, the time was used to resume the perennial search for the missing generator at Nanda Devi. Though Kohli and most of his fellow climbers had given up hope of finding the device, some of their superiors were unwilling to call off the chase. In the fall of 1968, in the final weeks before the onset of winter snows, Rawat went through the motions of a helicopter search, limiting his efforts to an aerial survey of the slopes and moraine. After several days of straining through binoculars from above, he called it a season in late October and returned to the capital.[6]

The following day, in a discreet corner of Charbatia, Sam and Mullik approached the generator. Mullik stepped forward, hands outstretched. “He touched the side,” said Sam, “and felt its warmth as proof.”[5] It was loaded into the C-130, and the plane taxied down the runway. One of the generators, at least, was off Indian soil.

Soon after he arrived in the Indian capital, however, Sam had second thoughts. On the climbing expedition, he had been fortunate to experience a fantastic adventure with a successful conclusion. The members from the two nations had bonded, without falling prey to the Cold War politics that motivated and frustrated their diplomats. But from his new seat in New Delhi, Sam was under far different pressures. By 1968, Indo-U.S. relations were measured and often cold. The CIA’s paramilitary presence, of which he was a part, was a vestige of the emergency assistance given in the immediate aftermath of the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict. Many Indian intelligence officers saw them as a tolerated annoyance. This was reflected in the restrictions placed on U.S. advisers. Although previous air operations officers had been posted at Bhubaneswar, the city in Orissa state that hosted the main ARC base, Sam was forbidden by his Indian counterparts to move to Orissa. “No white faces were allowed,” he recalled. “We were closely controlled.”[4]

T. M. Subramanian, the ARC officer who had worked closely with Tucker and the other CIA officers stationed in India, entered the room shortly afterward. Because Sonam had been given an eleventh-hour promotion to assistant director (equivalent to an army lieutenant colonel), Subramanian was there to pay the salary differential.[3]

For the next few months, covert climbing fell off the CIA’s agenda. In late March 1968, with his departure imminent, Tucker looked to leave on a high note by arranging for a forty-day survival course for senior officials from

the various Indian intelligence and paramilitary organizations. This idea had been pushed by former intelligence chief Mullik back in 1965, but little had come of it.[2]

Gougelmann's superiors in Washington shared his frustration. The importance of having an operational sensor was underscored on 24 December, when China conducted its second nuclear test of that year. As during three of the earlier detonations, debris sampling showed evidence of thermonuclear fuel. Despite the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, Beijing was clearly pressing ahead with its development of weapons of mass destruction.[1]

To make up for the imminent intelligence shortfall out of Pakistan, the United States scrambled for new ways to peer into China. One of the methods was Operation Heavy Tea, a joint covert project between the CIA and the air force from the Republic of China on Taiwan. In September 1968, a twelve-man air force crew was quietly taken from Taiwan to the United States and trained in dropping sensors from a C-130 transport. Nine months later, the crew returned to the Republic of China with a single unmarked transport. From there, it ventured to a secure CIA compound at Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand. On the night of 17 May, the plane, under the command of Major Huang Win-lu, departed Takhli on a course toward China's nuclear testing sites around Lop Nor. Flying just 1,500 feet off the ground, the C-130 managed to mask itself along the mountainous terrain. No communist countermeasures were encountered as the aircraft approached two locales about five miles apart. In the rear, a pair of crew members dropped dozens of javelin-like seismic sensors, each of which promptly buried itself into the arid landscape. These would send back signals when a nuclear test took place. After a total of thirteen hours in the air, the C-130 was safely back in Thailand.[2]

Perhaps a bit late, the Indian intelligence services attempted to expand and formalize their mountaineering capabilities. In January 1970, a High Altitude Operations Training Center (HAOTC) was formally opened under the command of Rawat. It was headquartered at Sandev, the same location as the telemetry relay post. Rawat was assisted by several of the Nanda Devi veterans, including Bhangu, Sisodia, and Wangyal. All these climbers were formally absorbed into the rolls of the various paramilitary organizations under Director General of Security Balbir Singh. The center would handle all future mountaineering projects tasked by Balbir and would also maintain an inventory of specialized climbing equipment to support such operations.[3]

The result was a high-technology "ear" listening in on China from above, far exceeding the ability of the small antennas on the manpacked sensors in the Himalayas. After all the years of toil and sweat, the mountaintop devices the climbers had slaved to install had gone the way of the dinosaur.[4]

President Johnson agreed with this assessment and in May 1966 approved the search for alternatives. Among the possibilities was increased intelligence cooperation with India and Iran. To cover Chinese intercontinental missile tests, shipborne sensors placed in the Bay of Bengal were also considered. Johnson, however, never really gave up hope of salvaging the relationship with Pakistan. In July 1968, with the agreement to use the Peshawar communications facility expiring in exactly a year, he penned a letter to Pakistani leader Ayub Khan and asked for an extension; short of that, he requested a reasonable withdrawal period to lessen the impact of its loss.[1]

In July, the committee's preliminary findings were delivered as promised. Containing both laymen's summaries and technical charts, the ninety-four-page report made a compelling case to mute the genuine fear, as well as the

associated political hype. Although the plutonium fuel in the generator had received much publicity as a highly toxic substance, the scientists repeatedly offset fear with fact. While the Pu-238 isotope was particularly deadly when inhaled in micron-sized particles, under most conditions, such as consumption of contaminated food and water, plutonium was less toxic than many other radioactive substances. In fact, the permissible concentration of plutonium in soil and water was much higher than that of other common isotopes.[12] The committee also noted that Pu-238 was not a fissile material. Thus, the generator fuel could not lead to an explosive chain reaction like a conventional nuclear device could. Noted, too, was the fact that the most recent silt and water samples collected from the upper reaches of the Rishi Ganga in April, like those collected periodically through 1970, showed no contamination.

As this was transpiring, RAW quietly dispatched Rawat to Nanda Devi in mid-June to make yet another visual inspection of the southwestern front. By coincidence, an American expedition had departed by foot into the Sanctuary just as the controversy became public. Rawat boarded a chopper and was whisked to the Sanctuary, posing as the Indian Mountaineering Foundation's "liaison officer," just as the team members were about to scale the peak. With the Americans unaware of his true role, he made his way up the slopes during midmonth. Keeping his eyes fixated along the sensor's likely path of descent, he saw nothing.[11]

By the first week of May, Kohli's phone began to ring. Khuswant Singh, the high-profile editor from India's Illustrated Weekly, requested an exclusive account, perhaps suspecting that Kohli had been involved in the Sanctuary missions. Kohli feigned ignorance and cut the conversation short.[10]

Arthur Davidson had good reason for frustration. A week earlier, he and five Japanese teammates had started up McKinley's South Face with high

hopes. They got as high as 15,570 feet when the mountain suddenly turned vengeful. “It was horrifying,” remembered Davidson. All around, the slopes were getting raked by slab avalanches while melting snow opened gaping fissures across their path. “It was well beyond our abilities.”[1] Worse for Davidson, the Japanese rations packed by his team were taxing his palate and sapping his energy. Heavy on nori (dried seaweed) and rice, the food had started to give the lone American severe stomach cramps.

Approaching the group, Davidson introduced himself. McCarthy and Frost were personable, though he found the rest rather tight lipped. All were breathing hard as they set up their dome tent and took inventory of their supplies. That evening, Davidson enticed the newcomers to the Japanese encampment. Swapping rations, he quickly devoured some of their Western fare; in return, Wolfe got nori and Bill a plate of rice.[2]

After returning from Korea with a refugee as his adopted daughter, Gougelmann served a stint as an instructor at Camp Peary. Not until the summer of 1959 was he again overseas, this time posted as chief of station in Afghanistan. The assignment hardly suited the gruff former major. Arriving with his infamous footlocker and ready to do battle, he was instead channeled toward the cocktail circuit to keep tabs on the Soviets in a more classic espionage duel. “Tucker was devoid of any social graces,” said fellow Afghan officer Alan Wolfe, “and ill at ease in such diplomatic settings.”[4]

Gougelmann remained in Vietnam for another year, and it was then that he made his mark. While advising the South Vietnamese Special Branch—a police-cum-intelligence organization focused on the communist infrastructure—he organized a string of provincial interrogation centers. Despite his unpolished demeanor and proclivity for salty language, Gougelmann displayed a sharp, calculating mind in this role. “He could

walk to an empty blackboard," said one fellow officer, "and start diagramming the local communist party . . . from memory."[5]

Given his passion for foreign adventure, Gougelmann joined the CIA in the fall of 1950. His first assignment was somewhat cloistered. Posted to a safe house on the outskirts of Munich, he served as an administrator for the CIA agent network under ex-Nazi spymaster Reinhard Gehlen. "Tucker came with two pairs of highly polished paratrooper boots in a footlocker," recalled one of his CIA superiors, "and little else."[2]

Though competent in the office, Gougelmann longed for the field. He transferred to Korea in the midst of the conflict on that peninsula and served as a maritime case officer and later as chief of operations at a training base that turned out road-watching teams. "His leg did not stop him," said fellow adviser Don Stephens. "He was still able to climb the rugged mountains with his students."[3]

Thirsty for detailed information about the blast, the U.S. intelligence community went into overdrive. Taking the lead was the U.S. Air Force Technical Applications Center, an organization whose sole task was to operate a global network of nuclear-event detection sensors to monitor nuclear programs. Eleven of its thirteen worldwide electromagnetic pulse stations, as well as seven of its acoustic stations, provided data on the timing and yield estimate of the Xinjiang explosion. Further information came from sorties flown by the center's special aircraft, which collected traces of nuclear debris carried by the jet streams over Japan and Alaska.[9]

There was another reason for their tension. While Bhangu was insisting that they start immediately up the Rishi Ganga, Mohinder was dragging his feet in the hope of avoiding the tough climb and getting an ARC helicopter lift into the Sanctuary. Not until 16 May did he reach B. N. Mullik by radio and express his desire for chopper support. Mohinder's request was particularly

ill timed. Mullik was in a foul mood because the week before, China had conducted its third nuclear test in as many years. Estimated at five times the kilotons of the previous test, this latest explosion was also thought to contain some thermonuclear material. With Beijing making obvious strides in its nuclear program, the need to retrieve the Nanda Devi device and activate it atop Nanda Kot was all the more pressing. Stop wasting time dreaming of an airlift, the crusty security chief chided Mohinder, and do a double-march along the land route.[1]

Still other plans sought to involve India. As early as February 1961, a secret U.S. Air Force study advocated nuclear weapons dispersal to U.S. allies and other potential cooperators in the region, including India. Later that same year, George McGhee, director of the Policy Planning Council at the State Department, wrote a memo to Secretary of State Dean Rusk noting that one way to reduce the political impact of a Chinese bomb was to encourage, even assist, India in testing a device first. A noncommunist Asian state might then "beat Communist China to the punch." As is now known, these ideas were never acted on.[5]

For its part, India needed no prompting from the United States to recognize the potential danger from a Chinese bomb. Fears were driven home in 1963 when a Japanese parliamentary delegation visited New Delhi. In a meeting with ARC director Kao, the parliamentarians spoke fearfully about suspected advances in Beijing's atomic program.[6] Though New Delhi shared Japan's concerns, there was little solid evidence at that time of the progress China had actually made. Beijing did not offer press releases about its nuclear development, and no foreign nation—not the United States, not India, and not even the Republic of China on Taiwan—had a reliable network of agents on the mainland.

In May 1964, a small CIA team arrived in Orissa with an unmarked spy plane. As planned, the plane performed a single mission over Xinjiang and headed back for Charbatia. As it touched down, however, its brakes failed, and the U-2 rolled off the end of the runway. Afraid of media exposure, ARC personnel manhandled the aircraft into a hangar—not an easy feat, given its massive wingspan—and waited for CIA technicians to make the necessary repairs. Once they were completed, the plane was discreetly flown out without attempting further overflights from Indian soil.[7]

Five months later, the desert sands of Xinjiang rippled as China detonated its first nuclear device on 16 October. “This is a major achievement of the Chinese people,” went Beijing’s immediate press statement, “in their struggle to . . . oppose the U.S. imperialist policy of nuclear blackmail and nuclear threats.”[8]

Command of this Tibetan force went to General Sujan Singh Uban. Fifty-one years old in 1962, Uban was an artillery officer with a reputation for unorthodox tactics. The army command was looking for an unconventional mind to harness the Tibetans, and Uban was willing and available. With the help of American financial aid and a CIA instructor team, he set up camp in the tranquil hill village of Chakrata and began the process of turning refugees into warriors.[1]

In the end, the Tibetan unit exceeded all expectations. The Tibetans particularly excelled as parachutists and had the distinction of conducting jumps at altitudes up to 15,400 feet using chutes specially procured by the CIA. “There was even a pregnant lady, the wife of the Tibetan ranking member, serving as a rigger,” said M. K. Anand, an air force officer and parachute instructor involved in the Tibetan program, “who kept her pregnancy a secret to keep jumping.”[2]

One of the ITBP's prime architects was senior intelligence officer Balbir Singh. An outstanding field hockey player in his college years, Balbir later excelled as a police officer in the Punjab and caught the attention of Mullik, who brought him to New Delhi in 1955 to work for the Intelligence Bureau.[3] Kohli first met Balbir Singh back in 1961 when the Intelligence Bureau threw a reception in honor of the Annapurna III expedition. On first impression, Balbir cut quite a figure. Tall, energetic, and a dapper dresser, he even managed to tie his turban with a distinctive flair. At the reception, Sonam Gyatso, one of Kohli's teammates on the Annapurna climb who also happened to work for the bureau, gave Kohli a nudge and pointed Balbir out, saying, "He's a big gun."

So great was this concern that Washington had spent years contemplating ways of destroying or delaying Beijing's progress toward developing nuclear weapons. Some of these plans were of a decidedly proactive nature. A still classified November 1963 memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for example, refers to "Unconventional Warfare Program Bravo" with regard to countering China's tests. In a Machiavellian twist, another plan hinted at potential joint action with the Soviet Union to enforce a Chinese test ban.[4]

With its tendency for ham-fisted propaganda, the Chinese state media were not modest about the launch. "China's millions are hailing it as a great victory for the invincible thought of Mao Tse-tung," said one proclamation the day after the launch. The People's Daily issued a million copies of a one-page extra announcing the news.[4]

As if to add insult to injury, Beijing conducted an encore detonation two months later. This one was exploded on a platform—not a missile—but the fact that it was the third of the year and packed some 300 kilotons (50 percent larger than the May explosion) was another reason for concern

among American and Indian policy makers. People's Liberation troops beat drums and triumphantly sang "The East Is Red," chimed one Chinese news release.[5]

Just as Bhangu and Tashi had done in June, Rob slowly curled his way through the rock fields above Camp Four. Making fast progress in the clear weather, he finally came upon the steep, fragile face that stood between him and the summit. He fixed crampons to his boots and began the delicate ascent. He had made little progress when the schist crumbled under his weight and he fell backward. "At that point I wondered to myself what I was doing there," Rob later recalled. "It occurred to me that I couldn't make it."[2]

His chest heaving in the thin air, Rob sat to clear his head and ponder his next move. Looking for a better approach, he crabbed clockwise around the peak before happening across a path of hard snow that had escaped the brunt of the summer sun. From this vantage point, the snow appeared to extend to the summit. On this route, Rob's crampons bit deep into the icy surface. After a draining half hour, the slope ended, and he was standing atop Nanda Devi. Temples pounding, Rob took out his camera and held it reversed at arm's length, snapping a roll of self-portraits to document his feat. Then he took out a single carabiner and pounded it into the rock. "It was a very personal moment," he said, "but I was completely wiped out."[3]

The arrival of the two Huskies was only one indication that the United States was getting more serious about the recovery effort. Also arriving at Gauchar was Dr. Bill Brewer, another nuclear expert from the Atomic Energy Commission, who had brought along two pieces of equipment to aid in the search. One was a standard metal detector meant to locate pieces of the metal casing hidden under the ice, snow, or soil. The other was a portable neutron counter. One of the characteristics of the nuclear fuel in the

generator was the emission of neutrons due to spontaneous fission. Similar in appearance to the alpha counter already in use since June, the neutron counter was capable of detecting neutrons at a depth of one foot of solid ice or ten feet of loose snow.[1]

The CIA also supplied ARC with a unique twin-engined variant of the Helio, appropriately called the Twin Helio. It had first been flown in 1960, and only five had ever been built. One had been supplied to a CIA proprietary in Nepal, and two had gone into the ARC inventory. Though the agency's own pilots never liked it much, the Indians gave the Twin Helio high marks. "It was more stable on landings than the regular Helio," said one ARC pilot, "and it had the added security of a second engine."[1]

Rhyne departed on his reconnaissance from New Delhi's Palam airport, then headed northeast for a little more than 200 miles. There were clear skies for most of the trip, making for a singularly uneventful flight. But just short of his target, a massive cloud bank loomed. Used to the mix of mountains and inclement weather while flying the skies of Laos, Rhyne plunged into the cumulous wall without hesitation. But the deities, it seemed, were determined to shield their goddess from prying eyes. No sooner had he entered the cloud than a single bolt of lightning slapped the plane. Recalled Rhyne: "The radio went out. The frame was magnetized so the compass locked at 120 degrees, rendering it useless. The controls were still responding, so I reversed direction to head out of the soup and make a dead reckoning back toward New Delhi."[2]

"He asked me to come down for a night to the University of Oregon campus at Eugene," recalls Blinn. After a short pitch, the team had its second member.[14]

McCarthy suggested the next two names. The first was Tom Frost. Clean-cut and perpetually optimistic, Frost had been a champion sailboat racer in

his early twenties. It was on sheer rock walls, however, that he became a living legend. By 1960, he was considered among the top "cragrats," an elite breed of climbers that challenged the cliffs of California's Yosemite. On these monoliths—Sentinel Rock, El Capitan, the Salathe Wall, to name a few—he pioneered bold routes that defied gravity and pushed the envelope of human endurance.[15] Frost's crowning ascent had been in October 1964. Along with three of the best technical rock climbers in the United States—and probably the world—he had prepared for a ten-day route up Yosemite's unclimbed North American Wall. It entailed hours of detailed planning to weave a path along the granite, leveraging through cracks and spidering across overhangs in an exhausting aerial ballet. Leaving on the last day of the month, they reached their goal with half a day to spare.

McCarthy's second call went to Harthon "Sandy" Bill. The son of a senior official in the National Park Service, Bill had considerable climbing experience in both Europe and the Pacific Northwest. When McCarthy made the offer, he volunteered without hesitation.[16]

Looking for other options, Bishop eventually found Robert Schaller. A track star in college (he had been one of America's top milers during the 1950s), thirty-year-old Schaller was in surgical residency in Seattle. He had been on several noteworthy climbs and knew the basics of high-altitude medicine. He also had an interest in electronics. Better still, he was unmarried with no dependents. A CIA representative was dispatched to Seattle to make the pitch directly to Schaller. Like the others, the doctor was intrigued with the prospect of a secret government-funded expedition. When he agreed to go to Washington for further discussions, the representative reached into a pocket and pushed a plane ticket into his hand. Said Schaller, "It was all very cloak and dagger."[17]

Based on all these data, the United States concluded that the first Chinese bomb had been relatively small at about twenty-five kilotons. Moreover, it was not thought suitable for delivery by missile. Still, Washington hardly saw reason for cheer. Given China's demonstrated willingness to make sacrifices for high-priority objectives, the United States believed that Beijing might be able to conduct a much more sophisticated thermonuclear test within four years. Moreover, China was known to be working on a missile with a medium-range (up to 1,020 nautical miles) capability; a Pentagon study written less than two weeks before the October test estimated that China might have nuclear-tipped warheads targeted against cities across Asia by 1970.[10]

There were drawbacks to both these eavesdropping systems, however. Just as with other kinds of spy satellites, there were few Ferrets in operation, and they made only brief passes over China; the chance of one being over a target during a missile launch was exceedingly slim. In addition, the existing ground-based systems were too far away to offer good coverage of China's likely missile test path between Gansu and Xinjiang provinces.[11] The closest existing site, established in 1959 at Badaber, Pakistan, was well positioned to pick up leaked transmissions from Soviet launches, but mountains and the curvature of the earth degrigated transmissions from Chinese tests.

There remained the issue of selling the idea to the Indians. Because the CIA had been handling joint covert programs for the past two years, the project was turned over to the agency. And since ARC director Kao had been the primary point of contact for joint projects, it was with him that the CIA first broached the subject. The gravity of the plan caught him off guard. "I was not authorized to sanction such an important mission," recalled Kao, "so I passed the message to Mullik."[12]

The following year, Nanda Kot case officer Sam Currie, who had just completed a one-year tour as the CIA's air operations adviser in India, was beckoned for an audience with CIA director Richard Helms. The director presented Currie with the Intelligence Medal of Merit, the agency's fourth highest award. "With deep appreciation for a job well done," Helms wrote on the bottom of a commemorative photograph.[1]

For Bishop, time was of the essence. On 14 May, China detonated its second nuclear device in Xinjiang. This time, the bomb was dropped by an aircraft over the test range (the first had been placed in a tower); it was about double the size of the first device and contained some thermonuclear material.[13] Given that a missile test could not be too far away, the U.S. government wanted the mountaintop monitoring device in place during that calendar year. In addition, because climbing seasons are circumscribed by weather, Bishop needed to have his expedition atop Kanchenjunga by fall at the latest. After that, snow and cold weather would make climbing suicidal. This left him with just a few weeks to identify and recruit five expert American mountaineers.

Among the Indian climbers, Rawat and Bhangu remained busy with the HAOTC at Sandev. They were supported by seven of the best Sherpas from their Sanctuary missions, who had been given full-time positions on the SSB roster during 1970. Wangyal was selected to command the training center at Gangtok that had been founded by Sonam (it had, appropriately, been renamed the Sonam Gyatso Mountaineering Institute). Sadly, Gyan Singh, who had saved Kohli from drowning in 1967, died four years later while climbing a peak south of Nanda Kot.[2]

Pleased with the results to date, the Intelligence Bureau and CIA initiated plans in 1966 to double the size of Establishment 22. With this increase came greater bureaucracy. General Uban, for example, came down from

Chakrata and was given an office in New Delhi. In addition, that December, Establishment 22 was given a new, equally ambiguous cover designation: the Special Frontier Force (SFF).[3] To support the SFF's mission, a number of bases were established around the country. For operations in the western part of the country, as well as for airborne training, it staged from a special air base built at Sarsawa, eighty-two miles south of its headquarters at Chakrata. For missions along the eastern border, the commandos staged from a smaller airfield built near the Burmese frontier outside the village of Doomdoomah. There was also a series of field camps dotted around the nation, including the one at Tejam.

While they had been making their way to the base of Nanda Kot, Sam Currie had been busy in the United States assembling the American climbing contingent. Finding volunteers was more difficult than in previous years. Unlike the climbers from India, who were government employees, the CIA was hiring civilians on temporary contracts. Each American mountaineer was promised a monthly stipend of $1,000 for the duration of the mission. This entailed taking leave from regular paying jobs and, in the case of doctors like Rob Schaller and David Dingman, forfeiting much better pay as medical professionals. "There was a definite element of patriotism in accepting the job," said Currie. "There was also a lot of 'because it's there' emotions common among mountaineers."[4]

For the next two weeks, the team studied the technical aspects of the climb. As the U.S. government would be footing the bill, Bishop was given carte blanche to order the best gear available. For the most part, he used the same equipment—parkas, tents, cameras—that had proved worthy during the Everest expedition.[18]

Throughout the winter of 1966–1967, representatives from the CIA and Intelligence Bureau debated their future course of action. Among them was

a handful of conspiracy theorists in the CIA—senior officials, in fact—who believed that the device was not missing at all. They were of the opinion that the generator had actually been recovered in June 1966 by the all-Indian team and that the nuclear fuel had been removed for use in India's own nuclear weapons program.[1]

Back at CIA headquarters, a search had commenced for a new case officer to manage the operation on the American side. After two years in the role, Bill McKniff had been shifted to a new assignment in East Asia. The whole Nanda Devi experience had not enhanced his career. Unfairly, he took some personal and professional heat for the failure to reach the summit in 1965 and the lack of success in finding the missing generator in 1966.[2]

Because all the Indian mountaineers on the secret expeditions were in some way affiliated with the government, their silence was enforceable. The same held true for the CIA case officers on the project. But that was not necessarily the case for the U.S. civilian mountaineers, whose confidentiality agreements lacked legal punch. And with a total of eleven American climbers brought into the project since the 1965 practice run in Alaska—not to mention the dozens of dependents, friends, and coworkers whose interest had been piqued by their prolonged absences—it was perhaps only a matter of time before the story went public.[3]

The first strong whiffs of a CIA nexus in the Himalayas emerged in 1975. This coincided with the first U.S. expedition attempting to summit K2, the second tallest mountain in the world and located on Pakistan's border with China. The mission was ultimately a failure due to extremely hostile weather. But when the team members returned to the United States, they were pelted with harsh criticism not because of their inability to reach the top but because of reports of squabbling among themselves and alleged friction with their Pakistani hosts. Linked to this, a prominent member of

the American Alpine Club, Alex Bertulis, began to spread rumors that the team had gone to Pakistan on a CIA-sponsored mission to place a monitoring device. The charge was completely unfounded, although those in the know noted that one of the Nanda Devi veterans, Rob Schaller, happened to be on the K2 expedition. The reason for the rumor, it turned out, was a personal feud. Bertulis had been dropped from the K2 team due to a spat with a fellow member. Apparently, he had heard hints of the Indian sensor missions and was intent on smearing the rival who had cut him from the K2 expedition.[4]

Worse was yet to come. During the months the K2 mountaineers had spent in Pakistan, Rob Schaller, who was still a Seattle surgeon, had been swapping stories with fellow team member Galen Rowell, who also happened to be an acclaimed photojournalist. Rowell had already heard the Nanda Devi rumors and, as an editor for American Alpine Journal, had even written a story that touched on the CIA's interest in climbing. During the K2 climb, said Schaller, Rowell pressed him for more details about the sensor missions.[5]

In early 1978, the United States prepared for a second attempt at K2. Even before the climbers departed America, Bertulis, who had again failed to land a berth on the team, began circulating rumors that the latest expedition had been organized and funded by the CIA. Just as the Seattle Times was preparing to run with the story, a law firm retained by one of the team members threatened the paper with a libel suit, and it dropped the article.[6]

At the time, charges of CIA missions in the Himalayas were largely confined to the climbing elite. On 12 April 1978, however, the story suddenly and unexpectedly reverberated around the world. Howard Kohn, an associate editor of Rolling Stone magazine who had written on environmental and nuclear issues in the past, broke the news with an exposé

in the May edition of Outside magazine. The Outside article was flawed, however. Although Kohn claimed to have spoken with "eight of the fourteen [sic] mountaineers . . . and three sources in the U.S. intelligence community," it appeared that the bulk of his information had been passed by Rowell from hearsay gleaned during the K2 mission.[7] The result was some questionable conclusions and multiple errors of fact. Among his more alarmist observations was that the sensor could pose a "radioactive menace for centuries." He also claimed that the search for the Nanda Devi device had been given up after a "short-term feckless effort" and that the CIA had insisted that India's "Central Intelligence Bureau" keep the affair secret from Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

This was the powder keg that the Kohn article lit. Almost instantly, Indian journalists seized on the angle of the "evil hand" of the CIA. One Mumbai weekly long known as a Soviet mouthpiece, Blitz, used some of the most fiery rhetoric. Not to be outdone, its journalistic rival Current ran a ludicrous front-page story claiming that Sir Edmund Hillary, the beloved New Zealander who had been the first to scale Everest, was a CIA agent.[8]

As the opposition bloc in parliament began to squeeze the issue for political mileage, Desai had no choice but to respond. As a first step, Ambassador Goheen was summoned to the foreign office, and he conveyed the word that the State Department was looking into the matter. On 17 April, Desai ventured to parliament and gave a brief account of the operation. He confirmed that one device had been lost in a blizzard, another had operated successfully for a year, and water samples had shown no contamination. At no point did he mention that China was the target of the operation. He further noted that there was little, if any, possibility of radioactive pollution reaching unsafe levels.[9]

On 30 July, Mullik paid his second visit to the Sanctuary. This time, he brought along M. M. L. Hooja, his intelligence protégé and ostensible successor as director general of security.[1] The two senior officers again lunched at an impromptu mess tent, where they made fast friends by producing a basket of mangoes and sweetbreads. Mullik continued with his conciliatory routine by heaping praise on Wangyal, who a couple days earlier had had a brush with death. He had been caught in the path of a granite shower when a rock the size of a baseball hit him square in the rucksack. Fortunately, the blow was largely absorbed by a glass bottle used to collect water samples.

Not content with these two, the CIA had sought a third American climber for the search. Sandy Bill, the quiet but determined mountaineer who had done well on Nanda Devi last October, was an obvious choice. However, Sandy had grown sour over what he perceived as stifling bureaucracy during the 1965 mission and refused further participation in CIA climbs.[2] Lute Jerstad, another obvious choice, was too busy with school and family to take another sabbatical. On Lute's recommendation, the agency approached David Dingman, a twenty-nine-year-old medical doctor practicing in Baltimore. Dingman had been on the 1963 Everest team, and though he never reached the summit, he selflessly supported those who had. He was married with children, but he agreed to arrange for a month's leave to join the project.

Despite the upheavals caused by the Cultural Revolution—China's destructive combination of ideological purge, policy dispute, and power struggle—Beijing seemed to be protecting the scientists and technicians working on these projects from the revolution's worst excesses. In August 1966, Beijing's Central Committee had issued a decision that said as much. As further proof, there had been the two nuclear tests in late 1966, then another thermonuclear blast in July 1967.[1] More disconcerting was China's

missile program. After the successful October 1966 test flight of the medium-range Dong Feng 2, over-the-horizon radar indicated that the Chinese had performed more than two dozen additional test firings of this rocket during the first half of 1967, almost all of them during May and June. Of greater concern, the U.S. and Indian intelligence services saw a growing body of evidence that the Chinese might be ready to test an intercontinental ballistic missile—with a range up to 6,000 nautical miles, capable of reaching North America—in the second half of 1967.[2]

Synergy between the two men suddenly became obvious. Bishop knew the Himalayas and appreciated the scientific and photographic aspects of high-altitude climbing. LeMay, whose air force was responsible for tracking tests by nuclear states and threshold nations, felt a pressing concern about China's nuclear program. For him, the ability to peer into Xinjiang and glean information about Beijing's atomic tests held merit. An era of covert mountaineering was about to begin.[2]

The idea to plant a nuclear-powered sensor in the Himalayas was hatched at a Washington cocktail party, or so the story goes. National Geographic Society staff photographer Barry Bishop was a regular on the circuit, where his impressive résumé had made him a celebrity of sorts. From helping to map Mount McKinley to conducting research on the Greenland icecap to serving as scientific adviser on the staff of Rear Admiral Richard Byrd, Bishop's experiences were as diverse as they were challenging. His defining moment had been atop Mount Everest during the first U.S. expedition to the summit in the spring of 1963. Selected as National Geographic's official photographer for the climb, he had succeeded almost at the cost of his life. Blasted by the cold and delirious from lack of oxygen, he left its slope with his feet frozen a sickly black and eventually lost his toes.[1]

By early afternoon, all the climbers had reached the two tents that constituted Camp Four. Six sherpas—including Dawa Norbu, who had scaled Nanda Devi the previous year—and Bhangu elected to remain there with the boxed equipment and the generator; the remainder retreated back down the slope.[1]

A fast systems check indicated that all the elements of the device were working properly. Sam and Kohli passed word to Sandev, where CIA technician Gordon Sleeper was manning a relay station along with a team of four U.S.-trained Indian counterparts. He began a battery of tests to determine if the antenna and transmitters were properly aligned and calibrated. If not, the climbers might have to fine-tune the positions.[3] A few minutes later, Gordon radioed back a response. The antenna was working perfectly, he said; no alterations were necessary.

Returning the pot of water to the butane burner for a quick reheat, the climbers maneuvered the first transmitter into position. At 1440 hours, Kohli received word over the radio that its post was fixed firmly into the Dome. Twenty minutes later, the second transmitter was up. Another fifteen minutes after that, the last component—the antenna—was standing upright. As one of the U.S. climbers took out a camera to document their handiwork, another took a piton and scratched the letters AMF (for adios, motherfucker) into the side of a transmitter casing.[2]

Intelligence cooperation, in particular, was on the wane. This was true for several reasons. First, previous showcases for joint action, such as the SFF, had already matured and had little need for ongoing CIA assistance, aside from an occasional specialist instructor. Second, the Soviet Union, which was doing all it could to score points with India, lost few opportunities to eclipse American inroads. When the United States did not schedule further aircraft deliveries for ARC, for example, the Soviets stepped forward and

provided the An-12 transport as the new mainstay of the ARC fleet. Third, there had been a furor in the Indian parliament in early 1967 over alleged CIA activities to influence national elections; some of this uneasiness was attributed to Soviet-sponsored forgeries designed to exacerbate Indo-U.S. friction.[1]

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Bhangu oversaw measures to safeguard the device on the slope. There were five loads in all: four cardboard boxes containing elements of the sensor, and one for the generator. Finding a suitable cavity adjacent to the Camp Four tents, he and the six Sherpas wrapped the boxes with nylon rope and secured them to the rock using pitons and carabiners. Special care was taken with the generator, which was anchored by extra rope. Nearly a third of the load was sheltered inside the cavity. Once this task was complete, the seven vacated Camp Four and moved down to the third level. From there, Bhangu relayed word of the steps taken to secure the generator, which Kohli duly passed on to New Delhi over the radio.

By noon, three chopper shuttles had taken the Americans and their personal equipment back to Gauchar. Most of the Indians suspected that they would be together for an encore climb next spring. Leaving by helicopter the same day was Sonam, who was in poor shape due to his recurrent frostbite. Dr. Tripathi attended to him during the flight.

Now, Sonam was out of contention due to his recurring frostbite, and Bhangu, after his prolonged wait at Camp Four, would probably be too weak for strenuous activity near the summit. Moreover, they had yet to blaze a trail to Camp Five. In an act of desperation, several of the Sherpas pulled on their parkas and boots and, braving the snow, attempted to claw their way up the next 750 feet. They got barely a quarter of the way before they were beaten back.

It was an anxious moment when Kohli peered from his tent that morning. Immediately, his heart sank. Fresh snow was piled near the tent flap, and flakes were coming down at a steady pace. Looking skyward, he could see Nanda Devi wrapped by flurries. Intentionally procrastinating, he waited until 0800 hours before raising the camps over the walkie-talkie for an update on conditions. There was a blizzard along the entire slope, he was

told, and the climbers at Camp Four were now looking for him to make good on his promise.

In the lead, Bhangu and Sherpa Dawa Norbu, tied together with a safety line, were pushing their way through the four inches of fresh snow clinging to the loose rock. Behind them, Sandy was leading another rope with Tom in the rear. Despite his stellar ability on rock walls, Tom was having a hard time at high altitude and had slowed his pace considerably. Impatient, Sandy violated mountaineering protocol and decided to unrope from his partner for a stretch. Later thinking better of it, he reattached his line, and together they continued their climb. They had nearly reached the midway point when the Blessed Goddess called for a sacrifice. As a section of rock and snow gave way, Sandy lost his footing. The rest came in slow motion. Hearing a shout and looking backward, Bhangu watched in horror as Sandy started to tumble past his partner. The safety line went taut for a split second, then Tom was also yanked off balance and started to slide backward in the soft snow. Trying in vain to stop their fall with ice axes and crampons, the two began to build speed. Three hundred feet below, Sonam and his Sherpas saw the pair plunging toward them, plumes of powder spewing in their wake. Instinctively, Sonam plotted their likely path and moved to intercept. It was a life-saving calculation. As the two Americans drew near, Sonam and his partner pounced on their colleagues and held firm. Luckily, neither Tom nor Sandy suffered any injuries in the soft snow. Had they continued for another 100 feet, both would have been swept off the ridge.

Rawat, Wangyal, Wangyal II, and a Sherpa had left late that afternoon to replenish the food supplies at Camp Three. After dropping off their loads, they decided to retrace their steps, but given the fading light and intermittent flurries, they were reduced to a crawl. Late in the evening, Kohli attempted unsuccessfully to get an update on their progress over the

radio. At 2200 hours, he tried to get some sleep not knowing whether his colleagues were safe. The minute the sun broke the horizon the next morning, Kohli was back on the radio. Relaying a message up to Camp Two, he waited for an answer. After what seemed an eternity, a voice crackled back. Through the static, he heard Rawat report that his party was safe, though their harrowing night trek was not something he wanted to repeat.

From Camp Three, a pair of Sherpas pushed upward toward the 23,750-foot level. Here the monochromatic expanses of gray rock fully gave way to calf-deep powder. Remaining alert to the danger of slab avalanches released from the higher slopes, they fixed safety ropes for the final 400 feet before arriving near their target at 1600 hours. Looking to excavate a sleeping platform for Camp Four, they sighted a small rocky depression that had been used in all of the previous expeditions to the peak. By that hour, however, snow had started to fall, and the wind was blowing furiously. After pitching a pair of tents in haste, the two Sherpas reversed course and came down. En route, they passed Tom and Sandy. The two Americans had arrived at Camp Three the previous day and were now intent on spending a night at the fourth level. Encountering the same strong winds, however, they were quickly turned back.

The bad weather continued through 13 October. With heavy snow falling at all the camps, upward and downward movement along the slope came to a complete standstill. Desperate, the three Americans at Camp Three ventured outside of their tents. Braving the blizzard, Tom, Lute, and Sandy decided to make a forlorn bid for the fourth level, but they soon turned back.

figure

Camp Three, Nanda Devi. In the background is Nanda Devi East.

NOTES

Though Kohli was scheduled to leave New Delhi within two days, he found Bishop's conduct sufficiently strange to warrant comment. Over the past few years, he had come in contact with various senior members of India's Intelligence Bureau, often during government receptions held after his various climbing expeditions. No intelligence officer held more clout than Bhola Nath Mullik. A member of the bureau since age thirty-three, he had become its director in 1950 and was one of Nehru's closest confidants. Serious and aloof, he was a confirmed anticommunist (rare in India in those days), extremely austere (he drove himself to work in a vintage Austin A-40 sedan), and thoroughly devoted to his job (he had never taken a day's leave since entering government service). Though forced to cede some of his considerable powers in October 1964, he remained a formidable personality and retained control over several covert paramilitary projects along the Tibetan border. In haste, Kohli penned a note to Mullik outlining his suspicions about Bishop's unannounced visit and focus on Kanchenjunga. That done, he boarded a train and proceeded toward the waiting slopes of Everest.

From Kohli's confidential debriefing, as well as from some of the other climbers on the missions, the government also learned of the extensive but fruitless efforts to find the missing sensor. Far from giving up early, as Kohn had insinuated, they had gone the distance in their search attempts.

Reviewing all the possible forms of contamination of air, water, and food under different accident conditions, the committee concluded that the overall risk was extremely low. The possibility of extensive air contamination was deemed most unlikely, with the probably of toxic levels being reached set at three in ten million. Regarding water contamination, a flow of 5,000 gallons a day—far surpassed along the Ganges system—

would dilute any potentially dissolved radioactive materials to safe drinking-water levels.

CHAPTER SIX

Worse was yet to come. During the months the K2 mountaineers had spent in Pakistan, Rob Schaller, who was still a Seattle surgeon, had been swapping stories with fellow team member Galen Rowell, who also happened to be an acclaimed photojournalist. Rowell had already heard the Nanda Devi rumors and, as an editor for American Alpine Journal, had even written a story that touched on the CIA's interest in climbing. During the K2 climb, said Schaller, Rowell pressed him for more details about the sensor missions.[5]

When Jimmy Carter won the election in November 1976, he indicated that he would take a firm line against nuclear proliferation (India had detonated its first nuclear device in 1974) and human rights, including India's shift toward dictatorship. Just a week before Carter assumed office in January 1977, Gandhi did the unexpected. Releasing thousands of political prisoners, she scheduled general elections for March. The result was an unexpected landslide in parliament for the opposition coalition. Morarji Desai, at the unlikely age of eighty-one, became India's fourth prime minister.

6. Camp Four

As the opposition bloc in parliament began to squeeze the issue for political mileage, Desai had no choice but to respond. As a first step, Ambassador Goheen was summoned to the foreign office, and he conveyed the word that the State Department was looking into the matter. On 17 April, Desai ventured to parliament and gave a brief account of the operation. He confirmed that one device had been lost in a blizzard, another had operated successfully for a year, and water samples had shown no contamination. At no point did he mention that China was the target of the operation. He

further noted that there was little, if any, possibility of radioactive pollution reaching unsafe levels.[9]

7. Given Indian reluctance to attempt more U-2 flights from Charbatia, the CIA was again faced with the problem of finding a suitable spy plane launch site within range of Xinjiang. In the fall of 1964, when a Chinese atomic test was thought imminent, the agency received permission to stage a single aircraft from Takhli air base in Thailand. To add plausible deniability, it was to be flown by a Nationalist Chinese aircrew. Although the U-2 was at Takhli by late September, it had yet to fly its first mission by the time the Chinese detonated their first device on 16 October. Because a Xinjiang overflight was then considered less pressing, the U-2 returned from Takhli to Taiwan in early November, taking it over several southern Chinese provinces en route. At that point, India reconsidered its ban and in December allowed a single CIA-piloted U-2 to briefly stage from Charbatia. Interview with Li-Yi "Jack" Chang, 7 March 2001.

In the interim, India fought a brief but bloody border conflict with China. India's military and paramilitary forces were fully absorbed with this episode, and Kohli was deputized to lend advisory support for high-altitude warfare. But by the opening of 1965, he was back on track for a third attempt on Everest. This time around, he was to be expedition leader. With the hopes of the nation on the team's shoulders—and especially on Kohli's—he was determined not to take any detail for granted. The amount of preparation that went into such a major climb was nothing short of mind-boggling. Because the climbers were ordered to domestically manufacture as much of their equipment as possible, this entailed frequent trips to various textile mills to order the correct fabric for their sleeping bags, windproof suits, and tents. For woolen items, such as pullovers and socks, they meticulously compared machine-made and hand-knitted alternatives. One Mumbai firm made their ladders; another did their rope. A Calcutta

company turned out a good clone of an American rucksack. India's Defense Ministry, which was just beginning to experiment with freeze-dried foods, reserved its entire six-month stockpile for them. For items that could not be made domestically, the mountaineers looked overseas. Quality boots came from Italy, oxygen bottles from France, cameras from Japan, high-altitude tents and battery-heated socks from the United States. Apart from a few minor delivery glitches, they received everything they needed on schedule.

In the interim, the media onslaught had gone into high gear. One respected commentator focused on the false allegation in the Kohn article that a frustrated American team member had assaulted an Indian intelligence officer. This was a reminder of the contempt the CIA had toward its Indian counterparts, the commentator wrote.

CHAPTER FOUR

With regard to the generator, Kohli went over old ground. He firmly believed that it had reached the glacier and melted its way to the rocky bottom. As they had found on Nanda Kot, the heat from the capsules would keep the ice at bay for at least six feet in all directions. As a result, there would be no pressure on the generator itself, allowing it to remain unmolested in this icy cathedral for several hundred years until the nuclear pellets died down.

EPILOGUE

The mission entered the Sanctuary as planned that year. Besides completing its assigned tasks, it also managed to put five climbers on the summit of Nanda Devi. And on the way out, the expedition members brought almost a ton of rubbish with them. Upon the team's return to New Delhi, a reception was hosted by the chief of engineers, Lieutenant General Visheshwar Kapoor. Kohli was invited to the event, which featured tables filled with the refuse removed from the Sanctuary. Most of it was standard climber's fare —empty butane jars, hundreds of plastic food wrappers, rusting carabiners —but as his eye landed on one particular piece of trash, his heart stopped. It was the olive-drab box used to bring the seven plutonium capsules into the Sanctuary.

With success almost within reach, Kohli reflected on their efforts of the past three weeks. Compared with the hardships endured in the Sanctuary, Nanda Kot had almost been too easy. From being feted during the approach march, to the good weather, to the more manageable slope—all were monumental improvements over the expedition to the Blessed Goddess. And with helicopter access easier than in the Sanctuary, General Thondup was afforded a steady stream of fresh vegetables and live chickens and goats (the chickens tended to die quickly in the thin air, but the meat was still fresh). If that were not enough, Tucker Gougelmann had arranged for a Twin Helio to make a regular mail drop over Base Camp with letters from home. Tucker was also doing his best to forward U.S. cigarettes, scotch, and even bottles of a noxious Indian rum called "Black Stallion," which Kohli was saving for the celebration at the end of the climb. Most mountaineering expeditions did not have it so good, which meant that fate was about to equalize things.

In the end, it all came down to luck. Two hundred feet from where he got hit, the slope banked slightly. As the avalanche reached this point, it impacted with a blast of powder. A portion of the slab of snow continued downward along an altered path, but its momentum was spent. Mercifully, Kohli was deposited on the snowbank with a few odd bruises. Even more miraculous, he had come to a stop less than ten feet from a yawning crevasse. Had he fallen in, he would have been buried by a couple of tons of snow.

The next day was a nail-biter. The weather was still holding—for how long, nobody knew—but progress was even slower due to the thinner air and knee-deep powder. And with the sun heating up the upper reaches, the telltale rumble of avalanching was growing more frequent. Leaving the Tibetans behind, the six climbers and four Sherpas pushed forward to Camp Two by early afternoon. With an eye on the clock, several from the party continued to the Saddle in an attempt to reopen a route. It was, predictably, an exhausting slog. The steep angle of the slope was now working in their favor, however, as it had allowed for little accumulation of powder. This made it easier to locate the safety lines left behind from the previous week. Rehabilitating the path to the best of their ability, they then retreated to Camp Two for a good meal and sleep. If all things remained equal, tomorrow would be D day.

On 27 May, not a single climber set foot on Nanda Kot. The radio messages from New Delhi were growing sharp and impatient, but with the blizzard entering its fifth day, their replies contained little hope. Kohli was almost positive that they had entered the monsoon season and that for the next four months, any attempt would be futile. They could wait around for a couple more days, he figured, but the chance of an extended break in the weather was growing more remote.

Returning the pot of water to the butane burner for a quick reheat, the climbers maneuvered the first transmitter into position. At 1440 hours, Kohli received word over the radio that its post was fixed firmly into the Dome. Twenty minutes later, the second transmitter was up. Another fifteen minutes after that, the last component—the antenna—was standing upright. As one of the U.S. climbers took out a camera to document their handiwork, another took a piton and scratched the letters AMF (for adios, motherfucker) into the side of a transmitter casing.[2]

Looking for more substantial employment, Sonam answered a recruitment drive in 1949 for a new constabulary force that was being formed along the frontier. He excelled during training and became a head constable. For the next several years, Sonam alternated between further training stints and long inspection tours along the Sikkimese border. Not surprisingly, he eventually came to the attention of the Intelligence Bureau, which was always looking for good recruits among the border populations. In the bureau, Sonam was encouraged to turn his love of trekking into a serious mountaineering career. In 1954, he passed the first basic course offered by the HMI and later participated in an advanced course to Nanda Devi. Though his team missed the summit by 500 feet, his impressive stamina had drawn attention. In 1958, his stature increased when he climbed Nepal's 26,750-foot Cho Oyu. This was the first successful Indian expedition to one of the Himalayan superpeaks, and Sonam had reached the summit without bottled oxygen.

There was also the role of the Soviet Union. With Washington irate at New Delhi over nonalignment, and New Delhi incensed over U.S. weapons deliveries to Pakistan, Moscow was quick to offer itself to New Delhi as a concerned friend with no strings attached. Indo-Soviet ties, as a result, began to bloom.

Kohli's remaining pick was actually his top choice. Sonam Gyatso, forty-two, was a native of Sikkim and had grown up in the Himalayas. As a young man he had been a traveling cigarette salesman and would take lone treks to 15,000 feet each month to stay fit. He was deeply spiritual—he prayed thirty minutes each morning and wore amulets from a host of Tibetan incarnates—and communion with the peaks was an integral part of his life.

But despite Nehru's intent, Indo-Chinese relations worsened. A major cause of the friction was Tibet, a closeted mountain kingdom that for centuries had enjoyed de facto independence. In 1950, China had pushed its way into Tibet, though it maintained the veneer of a quasi-autonomous Tibetan government. By the end of the decade, however, much of Tibet's nonsecular ruling elite—most notably the kingdom's premier spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama—had either fled or were imprisoned. The PLA, deployed up to India's border with Tibet, increasingly stepped over the line. Casualties mounted, especially among Indian border patrols, and diplomatic saber rattling increased in tempo and tone.

Ultimately, China's leaders did not show the restraint that Nehru and Menon had anticipated. And when the Chinese finally blitzed the border, Nehru sought foreign help. Coincidentally, the two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—were engaged in a nuclear stare-down as the Kennedy administration ordered a naval blockade to prevent Soviet ships containing missiles from entering the island of Cuba. Because Moscow needed Beijing's support during this crisis, a quid pro quo called for its backing of China in the border fighting with India.

With introductions over, talk shifted to the mission at hand. Though the Indians were still recovering from the Everest climb, there was some discussion over whether they should make a practice attempt up McKinley.

Instead of the suicidal South Face, they would use the relatively kinder West Buttress route. Though not nearly as technically difficult, even the West Buttress was considered extraordinarily dangerous that late in the summer. The climbers agreed to sleep on the decision and retired to their rooms.

The CIA found a far more receptive Indian audience in November 1962. By the end of Harriman's visit, the agency and the bureau had agreed to cooperate on several secret paramilitary programs. The first of these projects was an envisioned 5,000-man commando force based in India and consisting entirely of Tibetan refugee recruits. The Indians had actually conjured this project on 14 October, predating the Harriman visit by a week. But now with the United States on board, the unit was to be an Indian-controlled formation with limited CIA material and advisory support. Its role was to act as a behind-the-lines commando unit that could strike deep inside Tibet in the event of renewed Chinese hostilities.

Although Kao was dealing with Kohli directly, it was understood that B. N. Mullik, the former intelligence chief, was maintaining a deep personal interest in the sensor project. It was Mullik, in fact, who dictated the inclusion of two others on the team. One was Devi Singh Sisodia, a mountaineer and member of the Delhi police force on assignment to the Intelligence Bureau; he had been on the tryouts for the Everest climb but did not make the final cut. The second was Pedro Tripathi, a practicing physician who was serving with the SSB. Mullik knew and trusted both men.

By the end of the third day, Kohli had started to develop an uneasy feeling. Doing a rough mental calculation, he figured that the combined 125 pounds of sensor gear would require at least four climbers to haul at high altitude. In addition, it had taken about two hours to properly assemble the device on

a level snowfield. From what he knew of Kanchenjunga, it was a monstrous climb under the best of circumstances, without carrying extra equipment. Even if they could get near the required altitude, they would be lucky to spend forty minutes on top doing minimal chores, not two hours assembling a sensor. Kohli decided that it would be undiplomatic for him to share these concerns with his U.S. colleagues, however. Instead, he would wait until he got back to India.

From a distance, the SNAP resembled a metallic mushroom. The heart of the system was a hexagonal block of graphite. Seven small rods, termed fuel capsules, went into holes drilled around the block, with one hole along the axis and six around it. The seven capsules together contained 1,734 grams of plutonium, mainly the Pu-238 isotope. The block was sheathed in a squat, cylindrical aluminum container. Forty-five aluminum fins were arrayed around it to dissipate heat more effectively. The SNAP was then mounted on a single post, forming the “stem” of the mushroom.

Unwilling to let good climbing weather go to waste, Tom and Balu roped themselves together and departed to improve the route through the Saddle. This area, they correctly calculated, was going to be the critical bottleneck in their effort to get bulky loads to the Dome. Its sharp upper slope was covered with powder and a loose, rocky substructure, making efforts to stomp a solid path and fix safety lines exceedingly difficult. And because it was framed by sheer rock faces on either side, deviating to the left or right was not an option.

On 10 August, they headed for New York to finish off their U.S. trip with an excursion to the 1965 World’s Fair. After that, it was time to retrace their flight aboard Air India. When boarding was called, Kohli did a quick head count and found that they were short one member. Mr. Mac was hovering nearby, having clung to them like a shadow for the entire stay. Assuming

that he did not understand Punjabi, the Sikh members had taken to making fun of him in their language, and it was in that tongue that they began cursing their missing member. Mac then spoke up, telling them not to worry because their teammate was in the bathroom. The Indians fell silent, wondering if they had underestimated Mac's linguistic abilities and he had been eavesdropping on their conversations all along.

By week's end, the group was in San Francisco. In a brief misstep, their hosts took them to some crass strip clubs, which grated against Indian cultural sensitivities. They were also taken to an Indian restaurant for a welcome dose of home cooking. When their favorite dishes were not on the menu, however, they made the disappointing discovery that the restaurant's specialization did not extend beyond the marquee: the cook was black, the owner was British, and the receptionist—a tall Sikh—was a part-time student from Berkeley.

The next morning, all of them, including the SFF men, geared up for the climb to the next level. It took nearly four hours of monotonous hiking over an almost featureless slope. Since the Tibetans had not been expected to go past Advance Base Camp, Kohli was happy with their willingness to work. Generations of mountain living had left them with legs like spring steel; the day's labor barely left them winded.

CHAPTER TWO

Kohli confessed that he had met him on only a handful of occasions but had found him to be extremely rational. This impression was only partly accurate. Mullik could be a terror around subordinates, probably because of his penchant for perfectionism. But Kohli was only on deputation from the navy and was not too concerned about career advancement in the paramilitary forces. Besides, from a mountaineering perspective, his reasoning was sound, regardless of whether it conformed to any preconceived plans by laymen.

To lend air support to the Tibetan commandos and agents, a third joint program was envisioned. Known as the Aviation Research Centre (ARC), it was actually a subsection of the Intelligence Bureau and was staffed by bureau officers and aircrews seconded from the Indian Air Force. Its aircraft, a mix of transports and light planes, would come courtesy of the CIA. Instrumental in the establishment of ARC was Indian statesman Biju Patnaik, then the chief minister from the state of Orissa. Patnaik's father, also a minister from Orissa, had spent ten years in prison in the fight for Indian independence, so perhaps it was only natural that such activism and adventurism rubbed off on the son. As a teen, Patnaik cycled across the subcontinent—no mean feat, given the poor state of the roads in those days.

Selected as the first ARC director in the third quarter of 1963 was Rameshwar Nath Kao. Cool and methodical, Kao was a consummate spy in the traditional mold. He had joined the colonial police in 1940 and then transferred to the Intelligence Bureau seven years later, where he impressed his superiors with his keen intellect and calm demeanor under pressure. As the director of ARC, Kao not only oversaw covert air support but also served as senior liaison for most joint paramilitary programs with the CIA.

Not all the SSB's activities were based on winning hearts and minds. Special battalions were placed at the disposal of area organizers to train the local population in the use of rudimentary weapons and guerrilla warfare techniques. At the same time, an unconventional warfare training base (known as the Frontier Officers Administrative Training Center) was established in the forested hills near Mumbai to give senior SSB advisers a six-week primer in topics such as resistance operations, map reading, demolitions, airdrop techniques, and booby traps. Students were exposed to a variety of weapons, including those from U.S., Chinese, and Soviet arsenals. Field exercises—pitting the instructor candidates against an imaginary Chinese foe—were conducted in the forests around the center. These exercises, and the SSB program in general, received support from British military advisers for the first two years. One of the original senior instructors was former SAS officer Terrence Kitcat. Another, John Edwards, hailed from the Royal Marine Commandos; he kept nearly a hundred snakes in his bungalow, offering ample disincentive for burglars.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

In May 1964, a small CIA team arrived in Orissa with an unmarked spy plane. As planned, the plane performed a single mission over Xinjiang and headed back for Charbatia. As it touched down, however, its brakes failed, and the U-2 rolled off the end of the runway. Afraid of media exposure, ARC personnel manhandled the aircraft into a hangar—not an easy feat, given its massive wingspan—and waited for CIA technicians to make the necessary repairs. Once they were completed, the plane was discreetly flown out without attempting further overflights from Indian soil.[7]

Keeping track of China's missile technology was even more challenging than monitoring its nuclear tests. Unlike bombs, rockets do not have acoustic or electromagnetic signatures that can be detected from afar, nor do they release debris into the atmosphere that can be collected half a world away. Missile tests, however, do have an Achilles' heel. In order to monitor performance during such tests, rockets are rigged to radio data so that scientists and engineers can gauge things like pressure, temperature, direction, and fuel consumption. In short, this telemetry provides a blueprint on the capabilities of a delivery system. What's more, these transmissions are vulnerable to eavesdropping. In June 1962, the United States successfully launched its first Ferret satellite. Little more than a large antenna in the sky, it was capable of listening in on telephone conversations, as well as taped missile telemetry. This was supplemented by a series of ground-based dishes operated by the U.S. Air Force that focused exclusively on picking up remote telemetry signals.

McKinley's infamous weather, meanwhile, was proving less than cooperative. Flying into Elmendorf Air Force Base on the outskirts of Anchorage, the team was forced to wait through the last week of June while storms blanketed their target. Beset by boredom, the climbers spent their

days at the officers' club or playing sports. During a particularly intense volleyball game, Rob Schaller fell and twisted his knee. Rushed to the base hospital, he was declared out of contention for the McKinley climb.

By that time, Mullik had lost his primary patron in Nehru (the prime minister had passed away in the spring) and had been replaced as director of the Intelligence Bureau. Still, he retained control over covert paramilitary projects focused against China—ARC, Uban's commandos, and the SSB. A sensor mission in the Himalayas fell under his purview, and after listening to the concept, he was agreeable in theory.

For Bishop, time was of the essence. On 14 May, China detonated its second nuclear device in Xinjiang. This time, the bomb was dropped by an aircraft over the test range (the first had been placed in a tower); it was about double the size of the first device and contained some thermonuclear material.[13] Given that a missile test could not be too far away, the U.S. government wanted the mountaintop monitoring device in place during that calendar year. In addition, because climbing seasons are circumscribed by weather, Bishop needed to have his expedition atop Kanchenjunga by fall at the latest. After that, snow and cold weather would make climbing suicidal. This left him with just a few weeks to identify and recruit five expert American mountaineers.

Knowing the restrictions against aircraft encroaching in the national park, much less landing on McKinley, Davidson's interest was piqued. Setting out for the clearing, he arrived twenty minutes later and startled a group of seven climbers. His curiosity only deepened when he saw who they were. "I had not previously met any of them," said Davidson, "but I knew them by reputation, and that they were among the best mountaineers of the time." The clothes of the seven were also remarkable. "I was wearing torn

sweats," Davidson remembered. "They had great boots and high-quality down, which was rare in those days."

Kohli's next contact with Balbir came a year later. It was the end of 1962, barely a month after the Sino-Indian conflict, and he had accepted a position at the Defence Ministry as an adviser on snow clothing. The offer had seemed exciting in the beginning, but in reality, the post promised little more than visits to the textile mills around Mumbai. In addition, Kohli had just gotten married on 18 November, and the prospect of frequent and extended trips away from his bride, Pushpa, was not welcome. The job, moreover, afforded him little chance to pursue mountaineering.

The following morning, Bishop and Jerstad (named coleaders of the climb) stood with Bill, Blinn, Frost, and Wolfe on the Elmendorf tarmac. James McCarthy, who had helped Bishop select the team, was joining them in Alaska as the seventh member. Their gear had been specially procured by Bishop. The down parkas, wind pants, and down mittens had all been field-tested during the 1963 Everest climb and were considered cutting edge for the time. Also as used on Everest were their two-man and four-man assault tents featuring external aluminum trapezoidal frames. Bishop had helped design the tents, and the Eureka Tent and Awning Company made them to his specifications, along with a six-man umbrella tent for use as a base camp. In addition, Bishop gave each climber an Olympus Pen-S camera. Able to take seventy-two frames on a thirty-six-exposure roll of film, it required changing film canisters only half as often as a standard 35mm camera.

Apparently satisfied, Balbir filled Kohli in on the budding ITBP. Balbir believed there would be plenty of mountaineering opportunities with the unit, and he asked if Kohli was interested. Within hours, Kohli's assignment

to the textile mills was canceled, and he was seconded to the paramilitary ITBP.

The celebration, it turned out, was fleeting. No sooner had Kohli offered his thanks to the crowd assembled on the tarmac when he was tapped on the shoulder by Balbir Singh. Taking him aside, Singh asked Kohli to speak with ARC director Kao, who had positioned himself behind their DC-3. As usual, Kao was economic with his words. “Pack your bags,” he told Kohli. Kohli would soon be leaving for the United States with a team of Indian climbers for specialized training. “Meet me first thing in the morning for more details,” Kao finished.

For the U.S. government, the specter of a Chinese bomb was of major concern for several reasons. First and most obvious was fear over its potential use in an Asian war, especially with the Vietnam conflict escalating by the month. Second, Beijing could use nuclear saber rattling to sow rifts among America’s regional allies. Third, a successful nuclear test could be spun into a major propaganda victory by China, heightening its profile as a regional military power and economic model.

This meant that one of the few ways of gleaning information was to peer from afar by technical means. One option available to the United States was satellite photography. But even though notable advances had been made, satellites during that era were limited in number and lacking in resolution. Another U.S. option, the U-2 spy plane, had its own set of problems. Because China’s test sites were believed to be concentrated in distant Xinjiang, spy planes launched from airstrips on Taiwan did not have the range to make the round-trip. The CIA had earlier made discreet use of an airfield at Peshawar, Pakistan, which would put Xinjiang within range, but that had ended after the diplomatic furor following the 1960 shoot-down over the Soviet Union of a U-2 launched from Peshawar.

M. S. Kohli

Kohli's second pick was Sonam Wangyal, a climbing protégé in the employ of the Intelligence Bureau. At the tender age of twenty-three, Wangyal had been the baby of the 1965 Everest mission and the youngest to reach the summit to that date. Coming from the hills of Ladakh, Wangyal had climbing in his blood. While in junior high school, he heard his teachers waxing about the accomplishments of Hillary and Tenzing during the first Everest success, and he had devoted himself to mountaineering ever since.

Kohli did not have to look far for candidates. India's best climbers had been with him during the Everest mission, and most were close friends. Without hesitation, he mentally put four names on the short list. A quick pick was Harish Rawat, a mountaineer employed by the Intelligence Bureau. (Because the bureau was especially concerned about threats across India's mountainous northern frontier, it normally kept a stable of climbers on its roster.) Rawat's family had made mountaineering history in the nineteenth century. His grandfather and his grandfather's cousin had been pioneering employees of the Survey of India. They practiced their art with considerable bravery and a dash of espionage, because most of the Buddhist kingdoms along the Himalayas, especially Tibet, were extraordinarily xenophobic and would not allow interlopers, except those who came as religious pilgrims. Taking advantage of this loophole, Rawat's ancestors carried survey equipment disguised as religious items. Each had a Tibetan-style rosary, for example, but with only 100 beads instead of the customary 108. Every tenth bead was slightly larger, which allowed them to make discreet calculations of distance. Other instruments were carried hidden inside Tibetan prayer wheels. But this subterfuge barely lessened the danger they faced, and both were robbed and beaten on one foray into Tibet. Unfazed, Rawat's grandfather made a lone return to Tibet, this time disguised as a monk.

After four years—during which time his family had given him up for dead—he returned to India with some of the most accurate cartographic sketches of Tibet made to that time.

Wangyal had several outstanding qualities that Kohli sought. Thoroughly trustworthy, utterly selfless, and impossible to anger, he was the consummate team player. He had no inflated ego, despite his significant accomplishments at an early age, and was equally at ease leading from the front, cooking food, or cleaning a tent. Wangyal also had physical power best described by superlatives. No doubt owing to his mountain upbringing, he took high altitudes and extreme privations in stride. He could sleep soundly without a mattress, and plummeting temperatures and stinging winds had no appreciable effect on his drive or strength. He possessed a seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy, and Kohli had yet to see him reach his limit. During one famous episode, he had been blown into an impossibly deep crevasse, a predicament that would have killed most men. Freezing, injured, and without proper equipment, Wangyal somehow managed to work his way out of the chimney like a spider.

It was Jerstad who suggested the next candidate. Gil Blinn, a fellow trail guide from Mount Rainier, had been drafted into the army in late 1961 and missed out on the chance to compete for a berth on the Everest team. After his military service he returned to Rainier, where he clocked a speed record up its side that would stand for two decades. He had briefly met Bishop when the latter was on pre-Everest rehearsals. Blinn was still working at Rainier, now as a ranger, when a telephone call came from Jerstad.

Following that climb, Frost had left Yosemite to concentrate on designing mountaineering equipment. An aerospace engineer by education, he had a pronounced creative streak. That, combined with his understanding of the needs of rock climbers, led him to invent a range of revolutionary devices,

such as an extremely wide-angle piton fashioned from aluminum. For all his talents, however, Frost had one drawback. Technical climbers who focused on rock were a far different breed from alpinists who climbed on ice and snow. The first were spindly strategists challenged by gravity; the second were dogged survivalists facing the worst nature had to offer. Few of the former crossed over to join the latter. Though Frost had made some forays into the high mountains, extreme altitudes were not his forte. Still, McCarthy felt that his brilliance on rock added a unique dimension to the burgeoning squad. A phone call later, Frost was on board.

As this was transpiring, a major push was under way toward Camp One. Under clear skies, Wangyal, Wangyal II, Balu, and six Sherpas were hauling several hundred pounds of food and equipment destined for the upper reaches. Because Kohli's future was tied to the success of this mission, he elected to join them for the shuttle. By that time, he was answering primarily to Dave as head of ARC. Dave, in turn, was staying in close touch with Mullik, who was still helming the entire climbing project, despite officially stepping down as director general of security in the summer of 1966. Unfortunately for Kohli, neither Dave nor Mullik was renowned for patience. Thus far, they had successfully contained the fallout (figuratively) following the loss of the Nanda Devi device, but Kohli knew that a second failure on Nanda Kot would not be acceptable.

Bishop quickly got down to business and provided more details about their intended mission to Kanchenjunga. Under the best of circumstances, Kanchenjunga was a horrendous climb. At 28,146 feet, it was exceeded in altitude only by Everest and Pakistan's K2. With avalanches aggravated by monsoons whipping its base, it was widely considered among the world's most hazardous peaks. Two British parties had reached within twenty feet of its summit in 1955 (the Sikkimese authorities asked climbers to stop just short of the top to appease the gods), but it had not been attempted again in

the intervening decade. Adding to the challenge, Bishop reminded them, was their special load. Although specifics were not offered, they could expect to be additionally burdened by heavy and delicate equipment that required assembly at an extreme altitude. If that were not enough, they would be doing the mission in conjunction with Indian climbers who had not yet been selected.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As for Kohli, he had been serving as assistant inspector general of the ITBP since 1968. By 1971, he was looking for a different career path and had the opportunity to meet with B. N. Mullik, who suggested that Kohli move to the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India's external intelligence organization that had been created in 1968. Intentionally patterned after the CIA, RAW assumed control over all foreign operations previously handled by the Intelligence Bureau, and the bureau became responsible only for domestic matters. Included in the RAW mandate was oversight of the director general of security, who had control over the ARC, SFF, and SBB. R. N. Kao, the sophisticated and unflappable former ARC director, was named the first RAW chief.

At that point, Kohli sought counsel from A. K. Dave, who many years earlier had succeeded Kao as the director of ARC. Dave had remained with the Intelligence Bureau rather than transfer to RAW. Though there were rumors that he would eventually assume the position of director of the Intelligence Bureau, Dave's reputation as a strong-willed and independent thinker irritated Indira Gandhi. There were also hints that pro-Soviet members in the Gandhi regime, of which there were many, had labeled him as having the incorrect political pedigree. The end result was that Dave was given a lackluster command over a police training center, which he correctly interpreted as a slap in the face. He characteristically refused the transfer and resigned in April 1972. As a silver lining, he managed to land a prominent position in India's hotel industry.

To that time, word of the covert sensor missions had been kept from the media. But all that was about to change.

The bad news did not stop there. While waiting in Rishikesh, Kohli received a coded message from New Delhi informing him that the device on Nanda Kot had suddenly stopped working for reasons unknown. He was to immediately prepare another team that would determine the problem and get the sensor back in operation. His days of covert climbing had returned with a vengeance.

Upon his return to India, Kohli got word that the search for the missing device on Nanda Devi—on hold since the previous fall—was back on the fast track. This took him by surprise, because it was still the middle of summer, meaning that monsoon rains would make movement to the Sanctuary nearly impossible. Regardless, impatient intelligence officials from both the United States and India were insisting that the expedition get under way immediately.

figure
Sam Currie and the last goat just before leaving Nanda Kot Base Camp, 1 June 1967.

They found a pair of ponies to rent and continued along a narrow footpath to the next village. Kohli's kit was on the lead animal, and Kohli himself—his face heavily bruised—was on the second one about ten feet behind. For some reason, the ponies preferred to walk on the outermost edge of the trail, with a raging river some 10,000 feet below. Not comfortable being so close to the precipice, Kohli dismounted and proceeded on foot. No more than five minutes later, the inevitable happened. The rain-softened soil of the trail under the lead pony gave way. It struggled to gain traction with its front hooves, but the weight of Kohli's supplies worked against the animal. Peering over the edge, the climbers could see scarlet marks smeared across the rocks where it had hit on the way down. Kohli was left, quite literally, with the clothes on his back.

Nanda Kot had to have the last laugh. Once Sam departed in the Mi-4, Kohli set out on foot with the rest of the Indians, Sherpas, and Tibetans. As the more bulky equipment had already been lifted out by chopper, they had only their personal kit to carry. By that time, there was no mistaking that the monsoon season was upon them. Torrential rains were making the trails slick and turning innocent mountain streams into full-blown rivers. Barely a couple of miles from Base Camp, they came across one such body of water. Choosing a spot that did not appear too deep or turbulent, they began to ford the stream.

On 21 October, there was a major lift of the remaining supplies out of the Sanctuary. Since there were no Americans left, the scene was deemed suitably noncontroversial to allow the Indian Air Force to assist. Seven chopper shuttles were flown, five by ARC and two by regular air force crews. Together they hauled out some 3,000 pounds of gear, as well as the Sherpas, Sinha, and Kohli. By the time the last Mi-4 lifted off, the falling snow had reduced visibility to near zero. When the chopper reached Gauchar, it was still encrusted in a frosty glaze. Kohli recommended that the ARC pilot, Flight Lieutenant Davinder Suri, be given a gallantry award, but because the mission was classified, no citations were deemed possible.

By the time Rob returned to Camp Four, it was nearly sundown. He did not tell Tom what he had done, nor was he asked. His climb was one for the record books: the highest solo by an American mountaineer to that date. But the effort had taken a heavy toll. He had already dropped nearly thirty pounds over the previous month, and the added strain of his ascent to the summit left him shaking and breathless. Worse, his eyesight had been seriously reduced due to oxygen deprivation. With no peripheral vision, he felt like he was peering through two toilet paper rolls. And because of hypoxia or glare from the sun, or a combination of both, he was having trouble discerning color.

Rob's solo summit ascent provided an upbeat end to an otherwise disappointing expedition. By late September, after almost four months in the Sanctuary, not even the faintest trace of the sensor had been found among 271 samples taken from the nullahs and the glacier. With the snowfall increasing in frequency and intensity, a halt was called at month's end. In a familiar refrain, the mountaineers packed up all trace of their camps and hauled the equipment to the helipad.

The next day, 17 August, the search for the canisters commenced. Bhangu and three jawans hiked up to the snow line in an attempt to descend Nullah Two, while Gordon and another jawan intended to do the same at Nullah One. As had been the case all summer, avalanching was a constant hazard. One of the jawans with Bhangu had a close call as he dodged a boulder; after that, he lost heart and insisted on returning to the glacier. Gordon was more successful, working his way down Nullah One until he chanced upon two canisters lodged in the rocks.

Nanda Kot was not cutting them any breaks, however. Looking around for signs of the device, they saw absolutely nothing. They walked the Dome's circumference but found no visible marks or anomalies indicating an object under the surface. This was not totally unexpected. Given the speed with which the device had been buried in the fall of 1967 (after a single monsoon season), they assumed that it would be under even more powder after an entire winter and spring.

As the roster grew thinner at the Moraine Camp, Tom and Rob took the lead in repeatedly venturing back to the base of the nullahs during late August and the first week of September. But they, too, were growing bored with the search and lobbied for a change. Because no U.S. mountaineers had yet ventured to the collapsed shelf at Camp Four, they seized on this opportunity and volunteered to take another look. Though this was a fairly

transparent ploy to flex their climbing skills, nothing else was showing much promise, so their proposal was approved.

There was much riding on the success of the Nanda Kot mission. They were all pretty sure that its silence was attributable to heavy snow and that it could be retrieved in relatively easy fashion. But in the less likely event that it could not be found, the CIA would almost certainly balk at positioning a new device with two others missing.

With frustrations mounting, he took a brief home leave in the late spring of 1968. When he returned to the capital in the first week of June, his colleagues in the embassy had urgent news. “The gadget,” they said, “is waiting at Bhubaneswar.” Sam made two fast phone calls. The first was to his ARC liaison officer to arrange for a flight to Charbatia. The second was to B. N. Mullik. Although Mullik had been replaced as director general of security and had no official authority over the sensor project, he retained great unofficial influence. Recognizing this, Sam requested that he rendezvous at Bhubaneswar. In addition, the embassy had sent a cable to Washington calling for a special C-130 retrieval flight to come to India from Norton Air Force Base, California.

While retracing their steps to Base Camp, the expedition members relayed a radio message to New Delhi. ARC had been waiting for their call and had an Alouette III helicopter on standby. With the Soviet-made Mi-4 showing its age, two of the French-built Alouettes had been procured by ARC the previous year. Heading up to Nanda Kot, the chopper landed at the helipad near Base Camp. Jay Horace, the nuclear expert who had been on the Nanda Devi search, stepped from the cabin, took the generator, and was airborne again in minutes.

Since the Leh device was not available for positioning, the time was used to resume the perennial search for the missing generator at Nanda Devi.

Though Kohli and most of his fellow climbers had given up hope of finding the device, some of their superiors were unwilling to call off the chase. In the fall of 1968, in the final weeks before the onset of winter snows, Rawat went through the motions of a helicopter search, limiting his efforts to an aerial survey of the slopes and moraine. After several days of straining through binoculars from above, he called it a season in late October and returned to the capital.[6]

Their newfound cheer, it turned out, would be short-lived. By 15 August, the climbers had completed their initial search of the glacier near the nullahs. No trace of debris or unusual radioactivity had been found, but Gordon was not satisfied and requested that they start over. Unfortunately, dysentery was making the rounds and had put Wangyal out of commission temporarily. Worse, the Sherpas had staged a work slowdown at the Moraine Camp because they did not want to perform menial tasks such as cooking. In no mood to suffer their antics, Bhangu sent them packing back to Base Camp and requested that ITBP jawans take their place.

Located halfway between Dehra Dun and the headquarters of Uban's Tibetan commando force at Chakrata, Kalsi was the site of a small ARC air base. CIA pilot Jim Rhyne had actually tried to land a Helio at the Chakrata polo field but had severely damaged the airframe on the first attempt. Since then, Helio and Twin Helio shuttle flights made extensive use of Kalsi's STOL runway. Because it had more complete supply and maintenance features than Gauchar, the Soviet helicopters allocated for their mission were also regularly rotated back through Kalsi.

Since this was a joint covert operation, the CIA and ARC worked as equal partners. The U.S. team members and their sensitive sensor equipment arrived aboard a so-called embassy support flight to Palam. Met on the tarmac by intelligence officers from both organizations, the climbers were

whisked away without having to go through the normal customs formalities. The secret cargo, too, was discreetly rushed through a side gate.

To that point, Kohli could not help but feel that their mission was progressing quite satisfactorily. Although the joint team had been attrited by several members, those that remained were healthy and motivated. The remaining low-altitude porters recruited in Joshimath had been plied with solid meals, somewhat reducing their complaints. And best of all, the weather was holding out. But as good as this sounded, Kohli knew that morale and energy levels were fickle commodities that needed constant attention and monitoring. As several of his men had exerted considerable energy during the previous day's hike, he decided to let the Sherpas rest on 22 September. Bhangu spent a few hours that afternoon sorting through the food rations, while Lute and Kohli finalized the routes and ferry schedules for shuttling supplies between the various camps.

Showing his normal enthusiasm and resilience, a bandaged Sonam immediately volunteered to join Lute, Sisodia, and Kohli on a short acclimatization climb. Taking it easy on this initial outing, they hiked for about 1,000 feet before coming back to the helipad. Once there, they broke open some bottles of beer to celebrate their reunion within the Sanctuary. Tom Frost—or Tom Juice, as Kohli had dubbed him—downed a glass of citrus juice instead.

Besides the four climbers, the CIA also sent Bill McKniff as the case officer in charge of the U.S. side of the project. Despite being a China expert with little background in the subcontinent, McKniff would get on extremely well with his Indian colleagues. Arriving with him was Gordon Sleeper, the CIA technician who had been in Anchorage. Sleeper would not actually be going to Nanda Devi but would instead establish a relay station—ambiguously known as the Field Research Unit—atop a ridge near Sandev, a small town

about thirty-one miles south of the Sanctuary. He would be joined at Sandev by four Indian technicians trained in the United States. Sleeper's outpost would receive the signals from the mountaintop sensor, then retransmit the most sensitive data to New Delhi and Washington. The climbers were told that officials in the Indian and U.S. capitals could have readouts from atop Nanda Devi within three minutes.

CHAPTER FIVE

With the weather proving cooperative and most of the snow having melted off Nanda Devi's south face, everything was set for a major ferry shuttle on 25 May. In his baptism by fire, Mohinder, joined by four Sherpas, would carry a series of loads to Camp One, while the remaining two Sherpas would press on to Camp Two. In a repeat of the previous year, they also intended to persuade the low-altitude porters to help with the ferry to Camps One and Two and, depending on the weather, possibly even Camp Three.

Despite such real and fabricated medical emergencies, the expedition generally held to its schedule. There was little room for attrition among the three healthy Indian climbers and the six Sherpas, however, and Rawat kept everybody to a quick pace. Occupying Camp Two on the second day up the slope, they found the tent left from the previous season torn in three places. Bhangu and a Sherpa were forced to make tape repairs on 30 May in the face of razor-sharp winds.

Rawat and Bhangu took on the town's bureaucracy. After a few well-placed calls and patient explanations, they left the district office with the needed rice permits in hand. They then began dividing these rations into sixty-pound bags for the hike into the Sanctuary. At the same time, Sisodia sought out a local labor contractor to help find the porters they needed. Unfortunately, he settled on a middleman who proved a bit shady. While Sisodia stood by, the contractor took to a soapbox in the town square and promised prospective hires that they would receive new clothing and footgear if they joined the mission. In fact, no such perks had been approved or budgeted. Sisodia protested, but it was too late; the damage had been done. Pressed for time, he made some limp pledges that they would consider the promised clothes and shoes upon reaching Base Camp.

Battling freezing temperatures and unseasonably deep snow, the rest of the team, belatedly rejoined by Rawat, reached the Sanctuary on 15 May. Mohinder and Bhangu were still in Joshimath trying to sort out the porter difficulties; in the end, a contingent was imported all the way from Nepal to make up the difference.

On 7 October, the skies showed no sign of clearing, but they pressed ahead. The most delicate part of their mission took place that morning. Sitting in front of a large olive-drab box with radiation warning labels on all sides, Jim broke the safety seals and peeled off the top. Inside, seven radioactive fuel rods were nestled in individual glass cradles. With great dexterity, he delicately pulled each one out in turn and inserted it into the generator. Throughout the process, the others instinctively kept their distance. When it was over, the collective sigh of relief was audible. Coming forward, they could immediately feel heat emanating from the sides of the generator five feet away. Oblivious to any danger, the Sherpas snuggled up to the device, warming their hands and patting their faces. Despite Jim's assurances that the chance of dangerous radiation exposure was minimal, the friends and members were not inclined to join the Sherpas.

More delays followed. On 4 October, the low-altitude porters decided to take a day off to celebrate the end of Dussehra, a ten-day Hindu festival celebrating the defeat of Ravana by the Lord Rama, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil. Large effigies of Ravana are normally set alight on the final night, but the paucity of wood at the Sanctuary made effigies and bonfires out of the question. They were given a goat to eat instead, but unfortunately, a large carnivore—a bear or snow leopard, they never knew which—came during the night and left behind only bits of their intended barbecue. The gods, apparently, were not happy.

Back at the helipad, Tom Frost spent the day taking Jim on a more modest acclimatization run. This was very important, because Jim alone knew the intricacies of nuclear power and had the vital role of correctly placing the fuel rods in the generator before they departed up the slope. Jim was not a mountaineer, and he was an elderly man to boot, so there was concern that he might fall ill from the altitude and need medical evacuation. And if they lost their nuclear expert, they might fall hopelessly behind schedule.

Kohli next shifted his attention to preparing a team for Nanda Kot. Unfortunately, he would be competing for mountaineering talent with the concurrent operation to Nanda Devi. Besides Bhangu and himself, he was fortunate to secure the participation of Wangyal, Sisodia, and a few of the Sherpas who had been with them in the spring. Joining them for the first time would be D. Bhutia, a junior intelligence officer and ethnic Sikkimese working at Sonam's Mountaineering Institute in Gangtok. They were also given an ITBP radioman and, as porters, ten SFF Tibetans and an equal number of ITBP jawans.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Unlike the relatively uneventful route up to Camp One, the next leg to Camp Two was a serious challenge. Following the steepest and most narrow portion of the ridge, the climbers were faced with a sharp drop to their right the entire way. To the left, the view extended down to the glacier at the base of the mountain. About the only good news was that, like the first segment of the climb, the route to Camp Two was surprisingly devoid of snow. Reduced to a crawl as they negotiated the fractured rock surface, the five climbers hammered in a series of rope safety lines up the ridge. Rather than being connected to each other, they could protect themselves by clipping a short safety tether to the fixed ropes. Aching from the laborious effort, they stopped when their altimeter registered 20,200 feet, then carefully descended back to Camp One. Even Wangyal, who possessed more high-altitude strength than virtually anyone else on the expedition, could barely catch his breath when he entered his tent and radioed a status report to Base Camp over his walkie-talkie.

This is apparently what had happened to their nuclear device. Although the four components were elevated off the surface by posts, the posts' close proximity made them a choice target for snowdrift accumulation. A single season of monsoon snows was all it took to bury the entire apparatus under the surface.

As of noon, the eleven had made considerable progress. To their pleasant surprise, there was almost no snow or ice blocking their path. Instead, the route was littered with loose rock outcroppings, which easily splintered under their weight and sent showers of sharp gravel onto the climbers below. Not until 1420 hours did they reach a point that their altimeter showed to be 19,000 feet. Selecting a narrow shelf, they dumped their loads

and reversed course. By 1715 hours, they were back at Base Camp and awaiting dinner.

Sonam had another pressing concern. The temperature had started to plummet well below freezing at night, driving home the need to get the mission completed within no more than two weeks. Sensing the gravity of the situation, Kohli left Rishikesh and rushed back to Nanda Kot. By the time he arrived at month's end, his men were on the verge of a final push to the Dome. Bhangu and Wangyal were leading a party of three Sherpas and a single Tibetan SFF commando from Camp One to the newly established Camp Two. Already at Camp Two were Sonam, Sisodia, Bhutia, and another contingent of Sherpas. Bhutia and one Sherpa spent the afternoon stomping a route up the Saddle. Though it was still a major obstacle—prompting consideration of using a ladder to scale its toughest angles—both climbers were able to negotiate its features and fix a series of safety lines before retreating to their tents at nightfall.

On a lighter note, Kohli was still contending with a group of low-altitude porters who were sometimes less than willing to make supply shuttles between the Sanctuary helipad and Base Camp. To circumvent their lack of enthusiasm, he had the enlightened idea of bypassing the helipad altogether by having the choppers bring their loads directly to Base Camp. Because of the rocky terrain and steep pitch of the slope, landing an Mi-4 was not feasible, but Kohli thought that a free-drop of supplies would be a relatively simple and safe exercise.

Following their plight over the radio, Kohli had little choice but to cancel tentative plans for the three new Sherpas to move up to Camp Two. Cramped and with little appetite, they instead spent the rest of the day squeezed alongside Bhangu and Gautam, listening to the wind slap their tent.

Despite the upheavals caused by the Cultural Revolution—China's destructive combination of ideological purge, policy dispute, and power struggle—Beijing seemed to be protecting the scientists and technicians working on these projects from the revolution's worst excesses. In August 1966, Beijing's Central Committee had issued a decision that said as much. As further proof, there had been the two nuclear tests in late 1966, then another thermonuclear blast in July 1967.[1] More disconcerting was China's missile program. After the successful October 1966 test flight of the medium-range Dong Feng 2, over-the-horizon radar indicated that the Chinese had performed more than two dozen additional test firings of this rocket during the first half of 1967, almost all of them during May and June. Of greater concern, the U.S. and Indian intelligence services saw a growing body of evidence that the Chinese might be ready to test an intercontinental ballistic missile—with a range up to 6,000 nautical miles, capable of reaching North America—in the second half of 1967.[2]

Farther up the mountain, Sisodia and three Sherpas took turns extending the route to Camp Three. Inching upward in the cold, they barely added any rope before calling it a day. This delay in opening Camp Three was starting to cause concern. The next day, 2 October, a pair of Sherpas again looked to complete the route, only to radio back that they were short 600 feet of safety line. Growing impatient, Kohli arranged for a final coil of rope to be rushed upward from Base Camp. He also made it clear that they needed to have tents pitched at Camp Three by the following day; if not, they risked falling hopelessly behind schedule.

The Sherpas who had remained at Camp Two overnight set out in the morning to blaze a trail to Camp Three at the 21,200-foot level. Although this was just 1,000 feet higher in altitude, the challenges of the climb were increasing exponentially. Part of this was due to geology. The route they followed continued along a knife-edge ridge, only this time set at a seventy-

degree slope. As before, the terrain consisted largely of rock—mostly fragile schist—though pockets of snow and hard, glassy ice were growing more frequent. Compounding this was a high wind buffeting the upper reaches of the peak. Part of the challenge, too, came from the thinner atmosphere. As one approaches 21,000 feet, performing even simple tasks becomes exhausting. Dehydration begins to take a heavier toll due to poor appetite and heavy breathing in the oxygen-depleted air. To sustain itself, the body begins to burn the subcutaneous fat just below the skin. Robbed of insulation, human beings grow more sensitive to the cold.

Six years later, an improved communications intelligence satellite, code-named Canyon, took to orbit. One additional Canyon was launched in each of the three succeeding years. This was a vast improvement in coverage, but Canyon still lacked the ability to be in the right place at the right time.

Bhangu was the first to get an assignment under this new arrangement. In early 1970, a decision was made to close the Sandev collection station and shift the post to Leh. Given the high altitude, extreme cold, and heavy snow, this promised to be a hardship post of the highest order. Bhangu, who had just received the President Police Medal for his distinguished service over the years, was chosen to head the effort.

Their encore expedition to Nanda Devi would be a far less glamorous outing than the first mission. For one thing, the timing was set for late spring or early summer, making for warmer temperatures and far less snow than in October. For another thing, bringing down equipment was much less taxing than hauling it up and assembling it at high altitude. As a result, Kohli estimated that the operation needed no more than four Indian climbers and six Sherpas (not including the cook, Thondup), plus a complement of low-altitude porters to haul supplies into the Sanctuary. The inclusion of U.S. mountaineers, he believed, was not warranted.

Putting this plan into action, Rawat and Bhangu were in the capital by the close of April to procure the necessary food stocks. As before, Bhangu excelled as a logistician, meeting wholesalers at odd hours to scrounge up the requisite rations. Their provisions had to cover fifteen weeks, which they considered the absolute maximum time needed for the approach march into the Sanctuary, the climb itself, and the march back to Joshimath.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The obvious question was which peak would be the new location. Because the CIA had now lowered its minimum required height, Kohli returned to one of his original proposals: 22,510-foot Nanda Kot. This mountain had merit for several reasons. First, it was located along the outer ring of the Sanctuary, which meant that it was directly accessible from the outside without having to hike up the Rishi Ganga gorge and into the Sanctuary itself. This would greatly ease the logistical burden of hauling supplies to the base camp. Second, from a mountaineer's perspective, Nanda Kot had far fewer technical challenges than Nanda Devi. Not only was it more than 3,000 feet shorter, but its slope was less steep (aside from the final, sheer 500 feet), and there were few complicating overhangs or knife ridges. Moreover, Kohli had already climbed Nanda Kot and knew its idiosyncrasies, which included a gentle bulging incline of glassy ice, nicknamed the Dome, near the 22,000-foot level. According to the CIA's latest reworked calculations, the Dome would be a suitable height for the sensor.

Both modified choppers were then loaded into a C-124 Globemaster cargo plane and rushed west across the Atlantic. After meeting up with a crew that put them through a pro forma flight test, they were put back in a plane and shipped to New Delhi. The first week of August, the choppers were flown north on a final leg to a dusty riverside airstrip. Flight Lieutenant Suri, one of the ARC pilots flying the Mi-4, stepped forward and extended a hand. "Welcome to Gauchar."

His first order of business was to select a team. After the trials and tribulations of 1966, they decided to err on the side of caution by sending a rather large number of U.S. and Indian mountaineers. The CIA was in charge of arranging the American participants, so Kohli focused on his

countrymen. Keeping his selection to those who had already been exposed to the project, he picked the top-ranked veterans Rawat, Bhangu, and Wangyal. Among the list of second-tier climbers were Wangyal II and Sisodia. There would also be a dozen of their best climbing Sherpas to assist on the slopes. Captain B. S. Shetty of the Indian army would be the team physician, and Gyan Singh, a Punjabi police officer on assignment to the ITBP, was to be their radio officer.

Wangyal, always one to test his limits, was the first to begin weaving his way up. After barely passing the bottom waterfall, however, he stopped. The boulders were simply too big, too steep, and too slippery. Drenched and humbled, he did not like the odds and descended. Tom, in his element, tried next. But outfitted for an alpine hike, he was ill equipped to showcase his gravity-defying tricks perfected in Yosemite. Barely making any progress, he too came down. Though these top-ranked mountaineers had been bested, they were hardly frustrated. With the prospect of immersing themselves in a serious rock climb, the mission was suddenly more sport than work. Morale started to rise.

CHAPTER TEN

During that same period, Currie enrolled in the four-month class for prospective case officers. Learning the basics of recruitment, agent handling, and tradecraft, he became a blend of both instructor and field operative and found himself deployed around the world on short stints to train indigenous agents in a variety of espionage topics. During one such assignment in 1960, he was in Manila to tutor a pair of prospective Filipino sources in communications and reporting. While there, he was invited to the home of the CIA station chief, John “Jocko” Richardson. Currie apparently made a good impression, because two years later, when Richardson had taken over as station chief in Saigon, Currie was called to South Vietnam for a year-long posting. After returning to the United States, he resumed his duties at Camp Peary as a senior instructor. Currie also kept his pilot’s license current and often found an excuse to fly the small inventory of aircraft the agency kept at Peary.

CHAPTER NINE

Three days before they were to leave the capital, Kohli got an unexpected visitor. Sonam arrived at his office and declared—demanded, actually—his intention to join the expedition. He had his customary spark in his eyes and was exuding vintage enthusiasm, but Kohli could almost feel the aches in his body. Most top mountaineers have a relatively short window of opportunity before health considerations put the higher peaks off-limits. Between his age and his earlier bout with frostbite, Sonam was past his prime, but he was a proud and stubborn man who had no intention of quitting. With some reservations, Kohli penciled him onto the mission roster.

Leading the effort was Sohan S. Mahal, a joint assistant director in the Intelligence Bureau. Mahal was not a newcomer to the project; on and off for the past few years, he had manned the relay station at Sandev. Taking leave of this relatively relaxing post, he shuttled to Bomdila, a small town in western NEFA near the border with Bhutan. Bomdila had gained a modicum of fame two decades earlier when the Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet took him through Bomdila, where two Indian government representatives had been waiting to greet him. Coincidentally, A. K. Dave, the head of ARC who had overseen several of the sensor missions, had been one of those representatives.

To make up for the imminent intelligence shortfall out of Pakistan, the United States scrambled for new ways to peer into China. One of the methods was Operation Heavy Tea, a joint covert project between the CIA and the air force from the Republic of China on Taiwan. In September 1968, a twelve-man air force crew was quietly taken from Taiwan to the United States and trained in dropping sensors from a C-130 transport. Nine months later, the crew returned to the Republic of China with a single

unmarked transport. From there, it ventured to a secure CIA compound at Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand. On the night of 17 May, the plane, under the command of Major Huang Win-lu, departed Takhli on a course toward China's nuclear testing sites around Lop Nor. Flying just 1,500 feet off the ground, the C-130 managed to mask itself along the mountainous terrain. No communist countermeasures were encountered as the aircraft approached two locales about five miles apart. In the rear, a pair of crew members dropped dozens of javelin-like seismic sensors, each of which promptly buried itself into the arid landscape. These would send back signals when a nuclear test took place. After a total of thirteen hours in the air, the C-130 was safely back in Thailand.[2]

The Peshawar facility dated to a period of warm bilateral relations between the United States and Pakistan. A ten-year agreement to operate the center had been signed in July 1959 during the Eisenhower administration. But with the 1960 election of John Kennedy, who was seen as pro-India, the relationship deteriorated appreciably. By 1965, with Washington heaping criticism on Pakistan for renewed fighting in the Kashmir, U.S. officials saw little chance of extending the Peshawar lease.

The four of them veered north the next day before reaching the town of Bageshwar. They then turned east again, and twenty-four hours later they were at Tejam, a dusty hill town at the terminus of the road leading north toward Nanda Kot. Tejam was notable for a couple of things. Two years earlier, CIA technician Gordon Sleeper had surveyed the area and established the relay station for the sensor atop a ridge at the nearby town of Sandev. Tejam was also host to a small field camp for the Tibetan commando force led by General Uban.

Curious, Bhangu asked what he was doing. Checking for radioactivity, Sleeper replied. He had already swept the stones from the four camps, as

well as water from the Rishi Ganga. All gave normal readings.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The gods did not seem to be listening, however. On 3 May, their path was obscured by a heavy snowfall. Plodding along a narrow trail dug into a steep slope, Kohli fell midway back along their column and, looking ahead, saw one of the Tibetans coaxing half a dozen ponies. Suddenly, a cloud of white powder shot up in front of the Tibetan. Where the six ponies had been there was suddenly a void. Part of the trail had given way, sending the animals tumbling down the slope. They peered over the edge and saw a heart-wrenching sight. The ponies were in a bloody heap, their spindly legs twisted at unnatural angles. Several were barely alive, emitting human-like cries. Half the Tibetans fixed lines and rappelled down to retrieve their supplies. The journey was not starting off particularly well.

Rawat, in the meantime, had been busy reopening Camp One and getting it stocked. This required the normal surge in shuttle activity, which was made more difficult by the expedition's shortage of porters. Compounding matters was the focus of their search. Reflecting collective frustration, their superiors wanted to give the appearance of looking for the generator, even if it made no intuitive sense. As a case in point, Rawat was told to go back up the ridge and scrutinize the upper slopes, especially along the southeastern slope facing the Longstaff Col. To Kohli, this smacked of farce. The Longstaff Col—a ridge named for one of the first British explorers to venture into the Sanctuary—ran off the southern side of neighboring Nanda Devi East, the peak situated along the eastern wall of the Sanctuary. For the device to have fallen in that direction, it would have had to defy gravity by rolling dozens of feet over and across the Camp Four tent site before plunging down the southeastern slope.

Over in the Sanctuary, the search operation for the missing device had been progressing in fits and starts. Back on 1 September, their supplies had been

stranded for a week at Rishikesh due to closed roads brought on by landslides. There was an additional delay because of the perennial shortage of porters. Most local males were either busy in the fields (it was planting time) or employed by the director general of border roads, an office under the Ministry of Defense. Forced to turn to paramilitary assistance, the expedition was eventually allocated sixty SFF Tibetans and ten ITBP jawans.

Taking all this in, the search party was a bit overwhelmed. If the device had somehow gotten stuck in the snow line around 18,000 feet, the chances of it remaining exposed were slim. If it had rolled into one of the nullahs, it could easily be hidden anywhere along its steep, rocky bed. And if the generator had reached the glacial moraine level, it might have been camouflaged under a thick layer of alluvial sediment deposited over the course of the previous winter and spring.

For the Nanda Kot mission, the Intelligence Bureau had arranged for the SFF to extend logistical support. It was to provide porters from its ranks, as well as beasts of burden. Within the Indian paramilitary community, the SFF had quietly earned a reputation as a determined, often ferocious, unit. When twenty Tibetans turned out the next morning, however, Kohli was a bit taken back. In contrast to the relatively spit-and-polished jawans from the ITBP, these commandos had an earthy, primitive aura. Most had inadequate footwear, including a few with sandals, but this lack was more than offset by their focused, serious demeanor. With little exaggeration, they looked like they were spoiling for a war. And each of the twenty Tibetans had a pony in tow.

On 3 October, their diligence finally bore some tantalizing results. That morning, Jogi, Yonten, Bhatnagar, and a pair of porters had exited Base Camp with their technical gear. They were quick to note that the neutron

counter gave an initial reading of 150 counts per minute—slightly higher than the 105 counts recorded during the previous year, but not high enough to cause concern. Making their way to Nullah Two, the four began to sweep an area represented on their maps as grid square G-14. Almost immediately, the neutron counter shot up to 330 counts per minute, then settled back to 200. The climbers were not sure what to make of the anomaly. The generator's nuclear fuel, they were told, would give off a reading of 1,000 counts per minute. In addition, a pass by the metal detector over the same area was negative.

Though they had won the proverbial battle, they were losing the war. Frozen to the bone, the climbers could hardly function in the wind chill. After pitching a single four-man tent and erecting the antenna, their arms were too deadened to attach the rest of the cables. In addition, a recorder inside one of the transmitters was apparently not functioning in the cold. With hands and feet no longer registering any sensation, they ditched their gear inside the tent and turned toward Base Camp.

By that time, Rawat and Wangyal II had hiked up to Camp Two. The next morning they intended to press up another level. In their wake, they asked Bhangu, the Sherpas, and any available porters to begin restocking the lower camps with food. As this fell within the limitations placed by the Sherpas, Bhangu led them up to Camp One on 5 June. The next morning, they continued to Camp Two without incident. But when he called for a further hike up to Camp Three, the Sherpas fell back to their familiar refrain of fatigue. Disgusted with their lethargy, Bhangu steeled himself to continue alone. But spying a fresh blanket of snow and recalling the patches of ice en route, he knew that safety protocol prohibited a solo trek. Irate over the waste of good climbing weather, he withdrew into the tent to await a willing partner.

By that late in the season, gale winds were sweeping over the peak each night. Barely getting any sleep, Rawat and the Sherpas, new pickets in hand, managed to push their way back up to Camp Three at month's end. Using extra rope to secure a pair of four-man tents, they settled in for their first night, which proved memorable. As the winds reached hurricane velocity, the shell of one tent was completely shredded, causing its occupants to flee to the second tent. Each of the climbers sat in a corner to prevent it from being ripped from the ground. Again, there was little sleep to be had.

Met on the tarmac by officers from the ITBP, Bhangu was directed to the police barracks and urged to wait a week until the weather showed marginal improvement. This he could not do—he was under pressure to conclude the mission as soon as possible—but he did get a bit of good news radioed from New Delhi. Two other climbers, Wangyal and Yonten (both Ladakh natives), had been added to the expedition and were scheduled to arrive the following day.

It was then that the idea hit him. In a conspiratorial tone, he asked Tashi if he wanted to make an attempt on the summit that very day. On its face, the proposal sounded crazy. They were only at Camp Three, nearly 4,500 feet short of the top. All previous ascents had been staged from a fifth camp, and most took up to sixteen hours to reach the summit and return to the fifth level. Since they did not have Camp Five, and Camp Four had already been dismantled, Bhangu was suggesting an incredible round-trip from Camp Three.

None of them was happy to be there. The temperature was frigid, and light snow was starting to fall every day. As in years past, they were pushing the envelope by remaining well past the optimal climbing season. They were also exhausted, having been on multiple missions since spring. Worse, they

were told to stand fast and not resume the technical sweep until better equipment arrived.

Though competent in the office, Gougelmann longed for the field. He transferred to Korea in the midst of the conflict on that peninsula and served as a maritime case officer and later as chief of operations at a training base that turned out road-watching teams. “His leg did not stop him,” said fellow adviser Don Stephens. “He was still able to climb the rugged mountains with his students.”[3]

Senior U.S. and Indian officials had been informed of the G-14 discovery and were screaming for confirmation of what was potentially a major environmental hazard. Reflecting the seriousness of the situation, two senior officials rushed to Base Camp on 9 October. One was Muttoo, the SFF officer who had headed the Nanda Devi search the previous year. Joining him was Dr. Krishnamurthi, a senior scientist from the Ministry of Defense and an authority on nuclear physics and the Chinese missile program; he was heading ARC’s scientific section. Studying the two counters, they concurred that the mechanical registers on both were giving inaccurate counts due to the cold. As replacements, they brought two new counters with attached tape recorders believed to be more forgiving of the low temperatures.

The next morning, after some liberal swigs of brandy and rum, the climbers exited into the chill. The thermometer was still showing minus seventeen degrees, but the combination of alcohol and a slight drop in the wind gave them a psychological boost. By noon, they had the antenna up and the generator running. Heartened, the members stayed for another day to test the gear. The two technicians reported that they were able to record some radio signals from the antenna, validating the system and location.

As expected, Kao sent a radio message to Base Camp on 3 June calling for a second search of the Camp Four vicinity. That request broke the three Indian climbers out of their funk, and they suited up. Unfortunately, the six Sherpas did not follow their lead. Despite dining on Thondup's fare at the base of the peak, they claimed chronic fatigue. This news disappointed Bhangu. He had been with two of the six on Mount Everest and was having trouble reconciling their current behavior with their earlier heroics. "They had climbed continuously for fifteen days on Everest," he recalled, "and some of them worked for twenty-four days straight." Now on Nanda Devi, despite better food and pay, they were feigning sickness and staging a filibuster.

When he heard the bad news, Rawat was at a loss for words. Eventually he conveyed a brief, pointed message to Dayalu at Base Camp, who relayed it to New Delhi. Anticipating that Mullik and Kao would demand another search around Camp Four, Rawat gathered his Indian climbers and Sherpas and announced plans to return to the site the next day. At this, the Sherpas uncharacteristically balked. Despite their stellar reputation for taking on the world's tallest peaks, this group had suddenly lost heart in the mission and announced that they were too tired to work as high as Camp Four. This put Rawat in a quandary. Realizing that he could not conduct a proper search without their assistance, he reluctantly gave them permission to rest at Base Camp. Putting a lie to their fatigue, they suddenly grew animated and scampered down the slope.

Edging over the Saddle.

Their fast progress prompted Kohli to transmit a radio message to ARC headquarters in New Delhi. The message was addressed specifically to Anandbhai K. Dave, who had succeeded Kao as ARC director in mid-1966.

Known for his sharp intellect and independent mind, Dave had joined the Indian police back in 1942 and switched to the Intelligence Bureau twelve years later. Widely recognized as one of the bureau's premier experts on China and Tibet (he had been the first Indian official to meet the Dalai Lama when the latter went into exile in 1959), he was one of the rising stars in the intelligence community. His promotion to ARC director put him on the fast track toward the top of the entire organization.

After a twenty-minute descent, Bhangu reached the wires and scanned the debris. Bits of plastic and metal cable snaked out from a layer of gravel. In the hope that it might be connected to more substantive wreckage, he grabbed one of the cables and gave a tug. To his dismay, it pulled away instantly. The end had been cleanly shorn off. He spotted three other pieces of wire, but none was longer than four feet. Stuffing all of them into his backpack, he began his ascent to Camp Four.

The use of demolitions, in fact, was one of the reasons the climbers were there. During the Alaska prelude to the Nanda Devi mission, several of the original mountaineers in the program, including Tom, had been given a primer in the use of explosives in the event they needed to blast a shelf for the device. As it turned out, this skill had not come into play. But just in case the climbers needed to clear a platform on Nanda Kot, the CIA instructors at Harvey Point gave them pointers on detonating a range of charges. The climbers were also introduced (or, in the case of Tom and Rob, reintroduced) to the sensor, minus the nuclear generator, and were tutored in assembling its component parts.

While they had been making their way to the base of Nanda Kot, Sam Currie had been busy in the United States assembling the American climbing contingent. Finding volunteers was more difficult than in previous years. Unlike the climbers from India, who were government employees,

the CIA was hiring civilians on temporary contracts. Each American mountaineer was promised a monthly stipend of $1,000 for the duration of the mission. This entailed taking leave from regular paying jobs and, in the case of doctors like Rob Schaller and David Dingman, forfeiting much better pay as medical professionals. “There was a definite element of patriotism in accepting the job,” said Currie. “There was also a lot of ‘because it’s there’ emotions common among mountaineers.”[4]

Not until 14 May did the skies sufficiently clear for them to properly lay siege to the slopes. Perhaps to make a statement about his health, Sonam was in the lead of the column stomping a path from Advance Base Camp up toward Camp One. Behind him, their Ladakh prodigy Wangyal kept a steady pace, followed by Sisodia.

On 6 May, Currie and his mountaineers boarded one of the biweekly Pan Am flights to New Delhi. Arriving at Palam airport, they were met on the tarmac by Tucker Gougelmann and rushed to a safe house. Currie carried bogus identification for a Seattle-based front company called Inter-Ocean Aviation. Because he would not be under diplomatic cover, the ARC had insisted that he use fake credentials. If anybody wanted to check his bona fides, the CIA had arranged for a lawyer on its payroll to answer an Inter-Ocean telephone number in Seattle. At the safe house, the climbers waited while the Indian team finished clearing the helipad near Nanda Kot. While his three compatriots grew stir crazy, Tom spent most of his time calmly immersed in the Book of Mormon.

Two days later, following a brief delay to stockpile oil and aviation fuel at Gauchar, Wangyal and Bhangu were aboard the third flight to the Sanctuary. This time, they stayed behind as the Mi-4 went back to fetch four Sherpas from the bank of the Alaknanda. Quickly, they set about turning the Sanctuary landing zone into a proper camp. Tents were pitched,

and Thondup had a functioning kitchen by early afternoon. At the same time, Bhangu set up his radio set to establish a wireless link with Gauchar.

At 0500 on 9 September, they arrived at Rishikesh. Exhausted after a sleepless night, the Sherpas checked into a local guest house for a quick rest. Bhangu and Sisodia, meanwhile, went to the railway station to await Wangyal. Once he arrived, they set about transferring their supplies to a new set of vehicles with local drivers, and they drove that afternoon to the small town of Srinagar. After some much-needed sleep, they were back in their trucks the next morning and making the short trip from Srinagar to Gauchar.

By the morning of 20 September, morale at the camp was low. Things were about to change, however. In the distance, the sound of chopper blades reverberated across the Sanctuary. As the Mi-4's wheels touched rock, the side door opened. Out stepped three Americans and Kohli. For the first time in days, the team members, Sherpas, and even porters permitted themselves the luxury of a smile and moved with a sense of purpose. They had a mountain to climb.

The next morning, two more members arrived in the Sanctuary by helicopter. One was a last-minute addition to the expedition named Sonam Wangyal, the exact same name as one of the original team members. To make matters more confusing, both Wangyals came from the border area in Ladakh, and both were in the employ of the Intelligence Bureau. There the similarities stopped. Whereas the first Wangyal was youthful, incredibly strong, and a world-class mountaineer, the new Wangyal was older and had earned no major climbing accolades. The new Wangyal was also a bit melancholy over an affair of the heart. The previous month, he had gone home to Ladakh to marry his sweetheart, but the wedding had been postponed due to the worsening conflict with Pakistan. To avoid confusion,

the original team member would be known as Wangyal, and the newcomer was nicknamed Wangyal II.

As they scrambled off Annapurna III, the weather again began to conspire against them. Their earlier tracks had been obliterated by wind and snow, forcing the climbers to feel their way down as if blind. Lightning would occasionally bathe them in shades of blue, and the thunder that followed started to precipitate avalanching. All the while they were dogged by an annoying hum emanating from their goggles—apparently an effect of nearby lightning on the metal frames of the glasses.

His words left the climbers speechless. Since August, India and Pakistan had once again been wrestling over control of the contested Kashmir region. Pakistan had drawn first blood that month when it attempted to infiltrate a large number of Kashmiri guerrilla militants into Indian-controlled territory. The Pakistani generals thought that this would spark a general uprising among the locals. When this did not happen, they crossed the border on 1 September with armor and artillery. India, not surprisingly, reacted in kind. Though the conflict had been relatively contained along one section of the border, it had the potential to explode into a general war between the two neighbors. And based on Radhakrishnan's admission, it now appeared that all-out war was only hours away. The president claimed that Indian tanks would enter the Pakistani city of Lahore the following morning.

Hiring porters was more difficult than it sounded. Nanda Devi is perhaps the only major peak in the world whose approach march does not pass through any local habitation. The closest settlement of note is Joshimath, which lies west of the Sanctuary's gorge entry. Joshimath is a sprawling town, but it is known for little more than being the home of a great Hindu sage who attained enlightenment in a nearby cave. Given the harsh

reputation of the Rishi Ganga gorge and the fact that proper cold-weather clothing was practically nonexistent among Joshimath's residents, it was a good bet that none would willingly trek to the Sanctuary for any amount of money.

This second party departed New Delhi on 8 September and initially made good time. Driving past midnight, they had nearly reached Roorkee when a roadblock loomed across their path. Bhangu got out to investigate and found a crowd of fifty jittery students from a local agricultural college. A southbound truck driver, who had earlier passed through Roorkee, breathlessly reported that Pakistani paratroopers had landed at that town and were engaged in a bloody firefight with Indian soldiers. The students, understandably in a panic, were looking to defend their turf.

Kohli also sought out six Sherpas who had been on the 1965 Everest team. All were among the most fit on that expedition, and all had distinguished themselves carrying loads to the last camp. To Kohli, their sense of duty and loyalty was beyond reproach. The best of them—Tashi—was elevated to a head constable in the SSB; the remainder were given lesser status as temporary employees of the ARC. Through referrals, Kohli hired a final eleven Sherpas, all of whom were paid through the ARC budget. This brought his total to nineteen climbing Sherpas plus General Thondup.

CHAPTER ONE

Hiring Sherpas is something of an art. They do not carry proper résumés, relying instead on referrals and reputations gained from previous climbs. Kohli knew most of the top names, along with their achievements and idiosyncrasies. Two sprang to the top of his list, and Kohli was fortunate to find both willing and available. The first, Pasang Dawa Lama, had, among many other things, twice climbed Cho Oyo. His second ascent had been alongside Sonam, who rated him as one of the best climbers on the planet. It was no exaggeration: with his massive lungs, Pasang Dawa Lama could draw breath from even the thinnest atmosphere. Each time he conquered another peak, which was often, he would return to his home village in Nepal to a long victory procession—and a new bride.

Rhyne's instincts proved correct. Working his way out of the clouds, he came in low to the ground to get his bearings. Eventually recognizing some landmarks, he steered toward Palam and made a bouncy landing. A quick inspection of the outside showed just how lucky he had been. Various rivets had been knocked out, an antenna was dangling on the ground, there were scorch marks on the tail, and one of the tires was discolored. Most shocking of all was the condition of one of the landing struts, which looked like it had been riddled with welding spatter. After reviewing the damage, ARC quietly agreed that a reconnaissance flight was not a good idea after all.

By early 1965, ARC added its first rotary-wing aircraft. But instead of coming from the CIA, the Mi-4 choppers were offered by the Soviet Union. When it learned that Moscow was trying to impinge on its territory, the CIA was initially miffed. But because Indo-U.S. relations had hit something of a rut at the time, and the United States was not budgeting any further hardware donations of its own, Washington had little choice but to mute its protests when the Soviet offer was accepted.

On the surface, the photographer-cum-mountaineer and crusty cold warrior seemed to have little in common. But when Bishop spoke of the unique vantage point from atop the Himalayas—with an unfettered view across Chinese-occupied Tibet—LeMay was all ears. North of the Tibetan plateau was the expansive and arid salt deserts of China's Xinjiang province, where the Beijing government had sited testing ranges for its fledgling nuclear weapons and missile programs.

Kohli would soon see even taller terrain. In 1955, he became eligible for home leave. All officers had to declare their hometowns, but displaced persons from Pakistan were allowed to select any locale. Eager to see snow for the first time, Kohli chose Pahalgam in the mountainous Kashmir. Once there, he found snow in abundance. He also chanced upon a Hindu stranger who was planning to take a three-day pilgrimage to a holy shrine nearby. Though wearing only thin cotton clothes and casual shoes, Kohli decided to accompany him. Halfway there, the stranger—who was insulated with a woolen sweater—was turned back by deep snow. Fortified by a small bottle of brandy and a jar of honey, Kohli continued to the shrine, met with a resident hermit, and was guided back safely.

Not until 1934 was a mountaineering party able to force a passage through the gorge. Inside the ring they found a pristine, elevated basin that came to be known as the Sanctuary. Covered with green meadows in summer and thick with snow in winter, the Sanctuary was devoid of human habitation but rich in alpine fauna. Particularly prevalent was the Himalayan blue sheep, which ironically is neither blue (it is slate gray) nor a true sheep (it is an evolutionary blend of goat and sheep). These were preyed on by large populations of snow leopards and bears.

Kohli's family was hardly alone. As internal migration snowballed, three top Indian leaders took to the airwaves on 2 June to give details about the

country's impending division into India and the bifurcated Muslim nation of Pakistan to the east and west. They implored their countrymen to remain in their hometowns, and those who had migrated were asked to return. Heeding that request, Kohli and his father went back to Haripur, now part of Pakistan as of 14 August. But on 15 August, when India became independent and most South Asians were celebrating their official independence from England, the mood turned ugly in Hazara district. Haripur was burned to the ground, and nearly all resident Hindus and Sikhs were butchered. Among the few to escape were Kohli and his father, who sought refuge in a nearby fort. A week later, Pakistani troops shifted the refugees to a larger military camp, and a month after that, they got word that they were being loaded on open train cars and shipped to India.

As if Nanda Devi was not a sufficient challenge in its own right, the Indian climbers had had little rest since the Everest expedition and McKinley interlude. Under normal conditions, a mountaineer needs at least six months of recuperation after a major climb. Given that winter was fast approaching, they had less than a month to finalize preparations.

On 7 May, Kohli's team managed to set up base camp on the side of Nanda Kot. A bit less than three weeks later, they had struggled up its slope and were poised within reach of the summit. The party that would make the end run consisted of Kohli, a sailor, and a single Sherpa. When they left their tents for the final leg, however, the peak still seemed a long way off. Half an hour later, they found out why. An enormous bulging dome of hard ice ran in a gentle ellipse toward the top. Using the crampons—grids of steel spikes—on their boots to grip the glassy surface, they started over the dome in a light breeze. After traversing numerous crevasses, the curved ice field was below them by 1030 hours. Another 787 feet away was the summit. In between there remained one last obstacle: a knife-edge ridge that fell away in a near-vertical drop to the Nanda Kot glacier. This meant an exhausting

traverse across a harrowing path—a sight that made their Sherpa sit back in defeat, drained and unable to proceed. Roped together for safety, Kohli and the sailor carefully belayed each other upward. At 1420 hours, Kohli was touching the summit cornice. He broke a hole through it, lifted himself up on his elbows, and crawled the last few feet. When he was joined on top by the sailor, they unfurled a navy pendant before beginning the laborious descent.

15. Media Blitz

2. In March and April 1965, two small escape and evasion–survival courses had been run for key staff of the paramilitary units under the authority of the director general of security. On 8 August 1965, Mullik formally sanctioned a survival training cadre to be formed at the ARC base in Orissa. However, no further courses on this topic were conducted prior to the class held at Chakrata in 1968.

About the only bit of good news was the eleventh-hour arrival of Sisodia and a contingent of Sherpas, all of them seasoned from previous Nanda Devi outings. They took point and led a long column of ITBP jawans-cum-porters out of Tapovan, past Lata, and into the gorge.

Bhangu and Wangyal watched the grim transfer from a nearby tent. They had arrived at Gauchar that morning after their hasty shopping spree in the capital. At Gauchar, too, was Dr. Tripathi (on emergency orders to replace the deceased Gupta), three more Sherpas (including their faithful cook, General Thondup), Sonam (despite his vulnerability to frostbite, sufficiently healed for light duties), and Deputy Inspector General B. N. Muttoo. A Kashmiri policeman on assignment to the paramilitary forces, Muttoo had been serving as deputy commander of the Chakrata-based Tibetan commando force. He was being temporarily diverted from the Tibetan project to act as the senior bureau representative in the Sanctuary, which

would enable Kohli to eventually head back to New Delhi and coordinate U.S. participation in the search.

Knowing that continued debate was futile, Kohli left Mullik's office and beckoned two of his climbers, Bhangu and Wangyal, that afternoon. The Arjuna ceremony was off as far as they were concerned, said Kohli. Instead, they were heading back to Nanda Devi. Both were disappointed and sullen. Bhangu found the timing incredibly rushed; he, more than the others, could appreciate the effort that went into creating a coherent logistical plan. Still, they resigned themselves to the importance of the search and began packing. Joining them would be Dayalu, the intelligence officer who had manned their radio on the last outing. Rawat, who had been whisked away for an ARC aerial reconnaissance of the Sanctuary, would sit this one out in a support role. Kohli did not even bother to ask Sonam, who was still deemed vulnerable to frostbite.

As they drove farther east toward Lata, they came to the village of Tapovan. Barely a dot on the map, Tapovan sported a few earthen huts, a flimsy police shack, and a patchwork of withered, fallow fields. Under the summer sun, all moisture had been sucked from the surrounding landscape, leaving it a palette of tans and browns. Even the chickens were listless. Taking up residence near the police quarters, they set up Dayalu's radio and established contact with New Delhi. From the capital came word not to get too comfortable: the four of them, with barely enough rations to last a couple days, were instructed to prepare for immediate departure into the Sanctuary.

Sonam was not so easily dissuaded. Insisting that his report was accurate, he demanded that the spy be tracked down and captured. This did not sit well with the Indians at Base Camp. Bhangu, whose history with Sonam was rocky, derided the sighting as an unnecessary distraction. He also

thought it ludicrous to pursue a suspect who was possibly armed without having any weapons themselves. The three American climbers were slightly more diplomatic. Looking for an excuse to scale some modest slopes before tackling the nullahs, they agreed to comb the hills for the rest of the day looking for Sonam's suspect. As might be expected, they found nothing.

Not content with these two, the CIA had sought a third American climber for the search. Sandy Bill, the quiet but determined mountaineer who had done well on Nanda Devi last October, was an obvious choice. However, Sandy had grown sour over what he perceived as stifling bureaucracy during the 1965 mission and refused further participation in CIA climbs.[2] Lute Jerstad, another obvious choice, was too busy with school and family to take another sabbatical. On Lute's recommendation, the agency approached David Dingman, a twenty-nine-year-old medical doctor practicing in Baltimore. Dingman had been on the 1963 Everest team, and though he never reached the summit, he selflessly supported those who had. He was married with children, but he agreed to arrange for a month's leave to join the project.

That night, Thakral, the ARC scientist, met the searchers at the Base Camp perimeter and swept them with an alpha counter. It showed nothing out of the ordinary.

By 22 July, Gordon had reached Base Camp. He was greeted by Wangyal, who handed over water and stone samples gathered at the nullahs earlier that day. These were passed under the alpha counter—again, nothing out of the ordinary registered—then whisked out in the Mi-4 for further testing in New Delhi.

After more than a week on the slope, those on the expedition were beginning to feel the fatigue. Though the altitude was not particularly high and the weather was relatively warm, the constant hiking across the rocks

was taking a heavy toll on their mental and physical health. Part of the problem was the constant rain. Being the middle of summer, the seasonal monsoon pattern kept the Sanctuary under a steady drizzle that chilled the men to the bone. In some respects, this was even worse than being pelted by snow. Part of the problem, too, was that the search was being conducted in a haphazard fashion. They were not organizing their efforts or following a neat plan, making it hard to keep track of what areas had already been covered. As a result, gauging their progress was all but impossible. Worse, the ranking official at Base Camp, Muttoo, was not a mountaineer and was issuing daily orders without fully appreciating how this translated on the ground.

After a rain delay of one day, the search party was back on the slope on 20 July. This time, Bhangu led three Sherpas to the point where the two nullahs originated at 18,000 feet. Although the precipitation had ceased, a thick fog had rolled in and reduced visibility to just fifteen yards. If they had any hope of spotting the device, they would have to nearly trip over it. Through noon, the team maneuvered across the top of the gullies. Bhangu and Tashi —the same pair that had summited Nanda Devi in June—then fixed themselves to a safety rope and rappelled into the mouth of the southern nullah (dubbed Nullah Two). They nearly paid with their lives. Hearing shouts from the remaining two Sherpas, they looked up in time to see a table-sized boulder ricocheting toward them. As they hugged the side of the gully and covered their heads, the rock exploded in a cloud of granite shards, one of which sliced across Tashi's rucksack. Though neither was hurt, they took this as their cue to call a halt to the day's effort and walk back to camp.

2. Correctly noting that McKniff had come under criticism for the missing generator, Kohn ("Nanda Devi Caper," p. 28) claimed that mounting tension in India prompted some of the U.S. mountaineers to confront CIA

and Indian intelligence officers, even to the point of getting into a fistfight with an Indian operative and berating the head of the Intelligence Bureau. This is completely false; the relationship between Indian and American participants in the mission—both climbers and intelligence officers—remained warm throughout the entire project.

From the opening day, Joe captured their attention. Wearing a trademark bush hat, he spent much of the first week reviewing the theory behind survival on the ocean, in the desert, in the jungle, and (tailoring his speech for India) at high altitudes. Joe was a good orator and was passionate about the subject matter. He also managed to inject plenty of anecdotes, especially about instructing the astronauts.

For the next few months, covert climbing fell off the CIA's agenda. In late March 1968, with his departure imminent, Tucker looked to leave on a high note by arranging for a forty-day survival course for senior officials from the various Indian intelligence and paramilitary organizations. This idea had been pushed by former intelligence chief Mullik back in 1965, but little had come of it.[2]

Kohli was called for a series of meetings with CIA and Indian intelligence officials shortly before New Year to review the problems with Nanda Kot. Once again topping their agenda was discussion of alternative sites. The emphasis this time was on selecting a peak not only sufficiently close to the border but also with easier access in order to better maintain or repair the device.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Not until 26 June were the mountaineers officially given permission to return home and take time off. Kohli alone stayed in the capital, where a series of high-powered meetings was held between U.S. and Indian intelligence officials over the following week. This culminated in a 5 July tryst among Kohli, the CIA's Tucker Gougelmann, and ARC official Subramanian for the purpose of hazard evaluation. They discussed three main categories of credible accident conditions and two other categories of less likely accident conditions.

If the device had fallen down the mountain in the late winter or early spring, however, the snow on the slope would have been hard. Objects sliding down such hard, icy surfaces tend to bounce. Repeated bouncing would shatter the device, especially as it picked up speed in the fall. If the generator came apart and reached the surface of the glacier, the pieces could have gotten buried in soft soil or rock. Alternatively, the hot capsules could have come in direct contact with the glacier ice and sunk into its interior; theoretically, they could have been carried in subterranean water flowing inside the glacier.

From the chopper cockpit, Lalwani was uncharacteristically dour. He offered two options: either Sarin and Kohli could leave as soon as the helicopter was filled with supplies, which he recommended, or they could wait for the second shuttle in two hours. Happily snapping photographs with his camera, Sarin had no intention of leaving on the first flight. With that decision, 200 pounds of gear was stuffed into the rear of the Mi-4, along with the three Americans and Dr. Tripathi squeezed in among it. The heavy chopper then lifted slowly from the helipad and disappeared in the western sky.

Their adventure did not end there, however. They landed at Gauchar, picked up the three Americans, refueled, and headed for New Delhi. But just a few minutes out of Gauchar, lights started to flash on Lalwani's instrument panel. He made an emergency landing at a small field near Hardwar, and they waited for two hours as a minor repair was performed on the engine. Continuing on their hard-luck journey, they left Hardwar for what should have been a routine flight to New Delhi. Again, they had barely begun when a summer dust storm turned the late-afternoon sky the color and consistency of chocolate milk. Edging through the opaque air—and mindful that the engine intakes could get clogged with the airborne sand—Lalwani spent an extra hour reaching the capital. All the while, those in the back were depleting their adrenaline reserves.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Early the next morning, the two of them flew up to Gauchar and transferred to the Mi-4. Their pilot was Flight Lieutenant Lalwani, who, under normal conditions, was a daredevil who regularly pushed the Soviet-made choppers to the peak of their performance in all forms of weather and terrain. That morning, however, he looked to the skies and did not like what he saw. It was very dark to the east, with a solid cumulus cloud bank promising heavy precipitation by noon. Knowing that time was short, Lalwani curled out of Gauchar and made his first run into the Sanctuary. They settled next to a pile of supplies that had been carried over from the now vacant Base Camp. The Indian climbers were on hand to offer polite greetings, as well as introductions to the three American officials.

Landing in New Delhi shortly after noon, Kohli headed straight for the hospital. Ironically, Mullik was occupying a room in another hospital in New Delhi with a non-life-threatening ailment. The same, unfortunately, could not be said for Sonam. Entering his ward, Kohli looked at his friend and began to weep. Barely alive, Sonam's robust frame looked frail and shrunken. His face, normally burned a rich chocolate from the strong ultraviolet rays at high altitude, was waxy and lifeless, the color drained from his lips. His eyes were pinched tight, and his chest showed little sign of breath.

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